Intimate details

Participatory action research in prison

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ABSTRACT

This article enters the ‘intimate details’ of a participatory action research project nested inside a college-in-prison program for women in a maximum security prison. Conceived out of a conversation of prison reform advocates, the piece is deliberately not co-authored by all of the researchers – prison based and university based – because this article is an opportunity to reveal some of the delicate and difficult issues of working inside institutions of abuse and structural violence. The issues discussed could not easily be spoken about by women in prison, or even former prisoners, without jeopardizing their well being. Through the findings of the PAR project the piece will sample the impact of college in prison, but more intentionally it will interrogate questions of epistemology, ethics, method and politics as participatory action researchers take up projects inside state institutions, enforcing neo-liberalism through the prison industrial complex. The critical role of the ‘outsider’ who is ‘privileged’ to speak is interrogated, as is the responsibility to bear witness as the walls of prison consume communities of color and poverty.

KEY WORDS

- feminist methods
- participatory action research
- prisons
Soon after the photos landed on our doorsteps we learned that the violence was neither random nor spontaneous. Seymour Hersch detailed the events in an item in *The New Yorker*:

> [B]etween October and December of 2003 there were numerous instances of ‘sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses’ at Abu Ghraib. This systematic and illegal abuse of detainees, . . . was perpetrated by soldiers of the 372nd Military Police Company, and also by members of the American intelligence community. (Hersh, 2004)

Shortly thereafter, we were asked to speak on a panel, ‘What does Abu-Ghraib tell us about the current prison industrial complex?’ We spoke with a sense of political urgency because none of our co-researchers, who were former or current prisoners, could speak aloud about the everyday atrocities that constitute prison life in the US, today, now. And at that moment we realized a limit of participatory action research behind bars – that the sadistic details of everyday life could never be collectively voiced by those on parole. We – outside researchers committed to deep collaboration with these women in prison – would have to speak aloud about the atrocities we witnessed/negotiated in the midst of our participatory action research project behind bars.

In 1916 Madeleine Z. Doty wrote a book called *Society’s Misfits*, a diary of her prison experience. Miss Doty and a friend, Miss Watson, arranged to be incarcerated as inmates of the New York State Prison for Women at Auburn, just before Doty was to accept the post of prison warden. In chilling ethnographic detail, she tells us:

> A convict means dirt, physical, mental, and moral and is treated accordingly . . . I was a convict; therefore, I was full of vermin. Pleading a headache . . . the next instant I was told to bend my head and the contents of a dark-green bottle were poured upon me and rubbed in. The penetrating and biting odor of kerosene pervaded everything. A hot wave of indignation flooded me. Two days before my hair had been washed and waved and was soft and sweet-smelling. Surely my head might be clean, even supposing I had forged a check. (Doty, 1916, p. 14)

> I knew there was no good protesting, but I wanted to curse. Prison has a curious way of dragging to the surface all the profanity one has ever heard. Nothing else seemed adequately to express one’s hate and indignation . . . . Laughter in prison is a sin . . . . ‘Be still. Don’t you know where you are? If ye hain’t ever been in prison before, you’re in one now.’ (Doty, 1916, p. 19)

> After asking for a blanket I was told, ‘You shouldn’t ask me for a blanket, you ought to ask the day matron.’ So I lay and shivered. I was horribly uncomfortable, dirty, hungry, and thirsty and my bed grew hourly harder. The day had been a horror, but the night was worse. All my innate ugliness rose to the surface. I wanted to grasp my bars and shake them and yell. I would gladly join my convict friend in a smashing orgy if they didn’t let me out soon. I too had the devil in me. Rebellious thoughts surged in my brain. What right had man so to abuse his fellow man? What right to
Madeleine Doty could speak. And we would. We decided to publish an article on participatory action research (PAR) conducted in a women’s prison and write the intimate details – the pain and abuse built into prison life; the emotions that circulate through prison projects; and the joys and possibilities of democratic research in prison. We write this as two ‘outside researchers’ separate from our prison research collective of eight women in prison and five women on the outside. We write this because few can speak the truth about prisons without enormous personal vulnerability. While we may be outsiders to prison, we are all inside the prison industrial complex as it eats America.

We write because participatory action researchers have an obligation to reveal, when possible, the intimate details of PAR undertaken in difficult social institutions. We write this piece committed to participation and committing ironic betrayal. That is, the voices of women in prison, or now out of prison, will not be found in this piece, although they speak throughout all of our other publications and they co-author most (see Fine et al., 2001, 2004). We write here, explicitly without our collaborators’ names, although with their review, permission and blessing, because we speak some truths they dare not say.

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency . . . (Arendt, 1951: 352)

Cultivated on the spikes of social injustice, participatory action research projects are designed to amplify demands and critique from the ‘margins’ (hooks, 1984) and the ‘bottom’ (Matsuda, 1995), and to elaborate alternate possibilities for justice (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhavnani, 1994; Cahill, 2004; Lykes, 2001; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001; Torre & Fine, 2004). Legitimating democratic inquiry, PAR signifies a fundamental right to ask, investigate, dissent and demand what could be (Torre, 2005). Voices of dissent and radical entitlement shatter what Hannah Arendt calls the ‘lying world of consistency’.

In communities, schools or prisons, PAR projects document the subterranean pools of collective dissent by aggregating and making public ‘private’ troubles among very different youth, women and men. Revealing the common, public roots of these ‘private’ troubles (Mills, 1959), PAR demonstrates the differentiated consequences of social oppression, distributed unevenly (but not only) by race, ethnicity and class. PAR shatters the false consensus of neo-liberal institutional life by challenging the everyday banality and seeming inevitability of injustice. More specifically, participatory action research lifts the multiple stories and counter stories dwelling within any complex institution or social arrangement, privileging in particular those perspectives that age on the bottom of social arrangements, where the lies, the ghosts, the buried memories, the disposables, the traitors and the silences gather (see Harris, Carney & Fine, 2001).
In our work, PAR projects have been situated inside institutions where (in)justice reigns, where human spirits are being mangled, in the name of education or correction or youth development. Collaborating with those who manage to survive and some who resist, together we interrogate the very fabric of injustice in the (mal)distribution of resources, respect, opportunities, shame, failure and punishment. The work, in the end, even with permissions, approvals and collaborations at the top, is often quite inflammatory, with vulnerability – no matter how hard we try to anticipate the problems – unevenly distributed.

Fieldnote, early into the fourth year of our four year research project: Yesterday we learned that many of the women on the prison research team had their cells searched, papers thrown out, poetry destroyed. Some are being threatened with transfer to a prison near the Canadian border, others to Solitary Confinement. Their writings/their selves ripped from them, futures unclear. Demands that they testify against each other in another trumped up charge just to send chills through the institution. Will never quite understand the sadism of prisons . . . and will always wonder if the research – the laughter, inquiry, easy sense of exchange among friends so rare in prison – provoked a bit more outrage from the officers/administration even though we’ve been so explicitly collaborative . . .

Over the past decade, a loose and growing PAR collective has sprung up at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). We have designed a number of PAR projects:

- in a women’s prison in New York State, documenting the impact of college on women in prison, the prison environment and on the women’s post-release outcomes (see Fine et al., 2001; www.changingminds.ws);
- in wealthy desegregated schools documenting the segregation within and in impoverished communities excavating evidence of systematic educational injustice (see Fine et al., 2004);
- with mothers in under-resourced communities of the Bronx organizing for educational justice (Guishard et. al., 2003);
- with men who lead a street life (Payne, 2001);
- with young women from the Lower East Side of New York ‘fed up’ with the stereotypes that spew across their neighborhoods (Cahill, 2004);
- with youth in Nepal building boys and girls clubs (Hart, 1997); and
- with an elite university ostensibly working on ‘diversity’ issues (Torre, 2005).

Some of these projects have been designed for geographic and local depth, while others trace the sprawl of domination and resistance across geography and scale (Cahill, 2004; Fine, Tuck & Zeller Berkman, forthcoming; Katz, 2004).

In each setting, a series of ‘methods camps’ are launched so that we can learn, together, the local history of struggle and develop a shared critical language of social theory, feminist theory, critical race theory and methodology. Depend-
ing on age, immediate struggles and the nature of the research, we immerse ourselves in the writings and speeches of Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Fannie Lou Hammer (1964), Paolo Friere (1982), Orlando Fals-Borda (1979), Sandra Harding (1983), Stuart Hall (1997), Martín-Baró (1996), Nancy Hartsock (1983), Morton Deutsch (1974), Linda Thuwai Smith (1999) and others; we listen to hip hop, review magazines and policy representations of youth; and study civil rights histories and local campaigns.

Together, we craft the research questions, challenge each other to assure that varied standpoints are represented in the original framing of the question, and work through the specifics of design, data collection, analysis and products ‘of use’. With the tools of activist inquiry, an array of differences at the table, a loose-always-fragile democratic spirit holding us, and an eye on action, we raise up significant challenges to existing structural hierarchies that have been naturalized as if inevitable, and we imagine how to interrupt and re-create conditions toward justice. We take you into a PAR project launched in a women’s prison, to reflect back on details that are typically escorted to the margins, tucked in the folds, repressed in the unspoken memory or swept off the pages when final reports are filed. And we remind you that the reason only Michelle and María write this piece, for the research collective, is that women in prisons throughout the, and those released, cannot speak many of the words spoken here, without enormous retribution.

**PAR behind barbed wires**

In 1995, in the U.S., then President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act which effectively stopped the flow of all federal dollars (in the form of Pell Grants) that enabled women and men in prison to attend college while in prison. As a result, at a maximum facility in New York State for women, a vibrant 15-year-old college program closed, as did more than 340 other programs nationwide. The air in the prison thickened, with a heavy sense of disappointment and despair on the faces and in the bodies of women who had been participating in the college, pre-college, GED, ESL and ABE courses. Concern was expressed by some corrections officers who knew that college was foundational to ‘peace’ in the prison.

Fieldnote: Couldn’t believe it, at a meeting with community people a corrections officer, one of the sergeants actually said, ‘yeah, it’s [closing of college] a problem. When there’s college, at night they’re reading. When there’s no college, at night they’re fighting, and I find them biting each other.’

Within months, a group of prisoners, together with administration, community volunteers and local universities, organized to resurrect college. Established in
1995, the College Bound program has been in place in the prison for almost 10 years, supported entirely by a private, voluntary consortium of colleges and universities. A BA in Sociology is offered to the women, with faculty drawn from a consortium of eight to 10 local colleges and universities. Today more than a third of the women in the prison are enrolled, with many of the remaining women in G.E.D. (high school equivalency) and pre-college courses.

The physical space of the Learning Center, the hub of the college, is equipped with non-networked computers (with no internet), contributed books, magazines, newspapers, and flags from colleges and universities in the consortium. Here women will attest, ‘if I need help I can find it – even if that means someone to kick me in the ass to get back to work and finish my papers’.

College fills every corner of the prison. In the ‘yard’ there are study groups on Michel Foucault, qualitative research, Alice Walker. One woman told us that after dusk, in her cell block, she could hear the staccato ticking of typewriter keys late into the night; or a ‘young inmate may knock softly on [my] wall, at midnight, asking how to spell or punctuate . . .’

Eighty percent of the women at this prison carry scars of childhood or adult sexual abuse (Browne, Miller & Maguin, 1999). Most embody biographies of miseducation, tough family and community backgrounds, long lists of social and personal betrayals. College – even in prison – was an opportunity to learn to trust, ask for help, revise the past, give to others and re-imagine the future. For some, this was the first time such an opportunity was available, out from under the thumbs of family or partner threats, violence and/or endless responsibilities (Richie, 1996).

In 1995, Michelle was asked (by the ‘older’ prisoners who knew we could no longer take the college program for granted) to conduct an evaluation of the impact of college. It seemed all too obvious that a participatory design behind bars would be nearly impossible – and essential. We consulted with the Superintendent, who agreed with the design, after the New York State Department of Correctional Services provided official approval. Rosemarie Roberts and Melissa Rivera, then graduate students, taught a graduate seminar in the prison on research methods in which a broad cross-section of 15 students crafted questions of personal meaning concerning the impact of college in prison. With creativity and varied subjectivities, they generated questions drawn at the intersection of autobiography and the umbrella project question.

Their ideas for questions took varied forms, for example: What is the impact of college on your religious beliefs? How does college change the lives of women who have been abused by parents and/or men for most of their lives? What is the impact of college on mothers? On children? On lesbians? How does college affect young women from ‘bad’ high schools? What do the officers think of the college program?

For each question generated by a student, five interviews with women of
their own choosing were conducted with other prisoners (but they were not tape recorded as this is considered ‘contraband’). At the end of what many considered a rigorous course and others considered an exhilarating semester, we collectively gathered 75 interviews. Seven of the 15 women opted to join the College in Prison research collective.

The research team – Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Aisha Elliot, Michelle Fine, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, ‘Missy’ Melissa Rivera, Rosemarie A. Roberts, Pam Smart, María Elena Torre and Debora Upegui – met every two to four weeks, over the course of four years, with some leaving for other homes/prisons, all sharing a desire for college to be returned within prison walls. We hailed from New York, Jamaica, Maine, Puerto Rico and Colombia. We were convicted and not; immigrant and native; lesbian, straight, bi and all of the above; victims of violence and accused of murder. Some of us lived on the ‘honors’ floor, some were ‘trackers’ (under constant surveillance), and some of us could go home. All of us spoke English, and a number spoke Spanish too. We varied about how much we cared about politics, activist research, nail polish, hair and clothes, the approval of the warden and the long struggle for justice. Encumbered by limitations to privacy, freedom, contact and time, we inched toward a shared desire to climb over the walls that separated us, to carve a small delicate space of trust and work. We spent our 9–11 am sessions laughing, discussing, disagreeing, gossiping and writing, negotiating what was important to study, speak, and to hold quietly among ourselves.

We engaged in what Paulo Freire (1982) would call ‘dialogue’ which ‘always submits . . . causality to analysis; what is true today may not be so tomorrow’ (p. 44). Freire sought to create educational spaces, in our case both a community of learners (college) and a community of researchers (PAR collective), in which ‘facts’ were submitted to analysis, ‘causes’ reconsidered and, indeed ‘responsibility’ reconceived in critical biographic, political and historical contexts. The task was not merely to educate us all to ‘what is’, but to provoke critical analysis of ‘what has been’ and release, as Maxine Greene would invite, our imagination for ‘what could be’ (1995). We created what bell hooks would call a ‘space of radical openness . . . a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk. One needs a community . . .’ (1995, p. 149).

We were such a community. The most obvious divide among us was free or imprisoned, but the other tattoos and scars on our souls wove through our work, worries, writings and our many communities. Despite our shared commitments, the structures and waterfalls of white supremacy and global capital had washed over our biographies and marked us quite differently.

Usually our differences enriched us. Sometimes they distinguished us. At moments they separated us. We understood ourselves to carry knowledge and consciousness that were, at once, determined by where we come from, and
shaped by who we choose to be (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1998; Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987). We had hard conversations about ‘choice’. Those of us from The Graduate Center were much more likely to speak about structural explanations of crime and mass incarceration, while the women in the prison were stitching together a language of personal agency, social responsibility and individual choice(s) within structural inequities. This was not a simple progressive versus conservative ideological dance. These conversations and differences had everything to do with privilege, surviving institutionalization, and waking up (or not) to the images of bodies/screams in your past. (Please see Fine et al., 2001, 2003 to hear how the ‘we’ developed, when it unraveled, and how we negotiated significant differences among us. See these articles also for more detail on methods and findings.)

We worked together for four years and elaborated a complex multi-method design of archival research on years of college records and documents; nine focus groups with current students and drop outs; 20 interviews with women on the outside; interviews with a number of both sympathetic and hostile corrections officers; surveys by faculty and university administrators; and a focus group with adolescent children of prisoners. All of these methods were co-facilitated, to the extent possible, by Graduate Center and ‘inside’ researchers. At the same time, we asked the New York State Department of Corrections to undertake an extensive, quantitative longitudinal analysis of 36-month recidivism rates for thousands of women released from prison, stratified by those who participated in college and those who didn’t (see Fine et al., 2001).

We refer you to the website for the full reporting of our methods and findings (www.changingminds.ws). In brief, the material gathered was a strong confirmation of the impact of college in prison on women, their children, ‘peace’ in the prison, post-release outcomes, the leadership women provided in communities post-release and the tax benefits saved by society not having to subsidize those who return to incarceration (at $30,000 per year).

The New York State Department of Corrections conducted a longitudinal study of 274 women prisoners who were enrolled in college prior to release and compared them to 2031 women not enrolled in college prior to release (trying to control for crime and level of education when they entered prison). In this analysis, conducted over a 36-month period, recidivism rates dropped from 29.9 percent (without college) to 7.7 percent (with college). Further, from our focus groups and surveys we learned that women, children, faculty and a number of correctional officers spoke of the transformative changes that evolved in the college culture and the women. Women in prison who have, for the most part, spent the better (or worst) part of their lives under the thumbs of poverty, racism and men, could, in college, ‘hear my own voice’ or ‘see my own signature’ or ‘make my own decisions’. The women, and their children, re-viewed themselves as agents who had made certain choices, and could make other choices to repair
the wounds left behind. College students exhibited a kind of local leadership in
the prison, and post-release, launching projects on topics such as HIV/AIDS, edu-
cation, foster care, alternatives to incarceration, mothering from prison and the
teen program. With their research they were designing personal and social futures
not over-determined by the past.

The intimate relationships that knit us together as a research collective
brought a fever to the work. We were, of course, always watched. And we knew
that the futures of the program and our collaboration were always in jeopardy.
Too many tears, or bringing in too much food could provoke an officer to shut us
down. In a research meeting it was common for us to jog between hope/possi-
bility and despair/fear, as our collective unconscious wouldn’t allow us to settle
on the latter terms for too long. Sometimes, in a research meeting, or the gradu-
ate course, we would pause as a research member detailed the difficulty of register-
ing new students eager to start the program with one or two courses, as she
silently feared the program might close before the students could graduate; as
another wept because her parents had traveled from Nevada to visit and the
paper work somehow couldn’t be found by a correction officer when her parents
arrived, so the visit had to be canceled; as we listened to details of a botched
kidney transplant; as we held each other because a mother serving 20 to life just
learned her son was selling drugs and she couldn’t stop him; as we discovered that
one of the students was sent to the Solitary Housing Unit because she tried to cut
herself; when we learned that a corrections officer and a civilian engaged in inti-
mate relations, were caught . . . and a woman prisoner was sent to solitary. Other
times we deliberately stayed clear of such conversations, keeping ‘on task’ as a
way to exert control where little was available. The context and physical envi-
ronment of our research was harsh, noisy and without privacy, by design.

We spent much time, as a research collective, discussing what is to be
gained from participatory action research. There are, of course, the instrumental
gains – insiders know more, know better and in more depth how an organization,
community and indeed a prison operates. PAR represents an exquisite and
elegant design for gathering up, legitimating and broadcasting subjugated knowl-
edges (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhavnani, 1994; Davis, 2003). Outsiders have the fresh-
ness to ask the deliberately naïve questions (Kvale, 1996), and have the relative
freedom to speak a kind of truth to power that may provoke new lines of analy-
sis. But rarely did we operate as two separate and coherent constituencies. Instead
we grew to be, over time, a group of women with very distinct and sometimes
overlapping commitments, questions, worries, rage, and theoretical and political
concerns.

At our rectangular, cramped, uneven wooden table in the Learning Center,
we huddled around smuggled fruits and butter-tastes-like-this-now? cookies, and
our writing. There were long, extended conversations held there, as other women –
students in the college program – completed research papers, studied for the
GED, tutored ‘new women’, and cared for their seeing-eye-dogs in an innovative training program. Among our research collective, we would each bring in the writing we had done, focused on our distinct sections and concerns. Two snippets of conversation come to mind, revealing the complexity of democratic collaboration in a para-military institution, as the Superintendent liked to remind us.

November 1999. We had just completed the interviews and focus groups, all collaboratively facilitated by a prisoner researcher and an (outside) graduate student researcher. The transcriptions were complete and our analyses emerging. Researchers from The Graduate Center brought the codes into the prison to see if the women would agree with the coding scheme. It seemed all was going well, when suddenly, Judy asked, ‘So we get to collect the data, but you do the analysis? What kind of division of labor is that?’ A delicate question, bathing in insight. In the name of ethics and confidentiality, we had (unwittingly?) separated data collection from the political and theoretical work of analysis. And so another long talk about power, process and democracy ensued. We struggled to figure out a way to bring the transcribed interviews into the prison and leave them there (prisoners have no access to locked cabinets, and confidentiality would be violated if these interviews were allowed to lay around for public viewing). With prisoner and outside collaborative wit, figured it out.

March 2000. Later in our research process, we had completed the research and we were trying to figure out how to write our text – single voiced, or multi-voiced? Filled with the questions and contradictions of participatory work, or coherent and authoritative? Stuffed with feminist complexity or social science parsimony? How should we determine authorship – alphabetize? separate prisoner researchers and Graduate Center researchers? put Michelle’s name first because of ‘legitimacy’? don’t put some of the high profile prisoners’ names first because of concerns about perceptions? Place the most ‘wanted’ of us all up front to demonstrate the power of our collaboration???

Our primary goal was to convince the New York State legislature to restore funds for college in prison programs. But we also wanted to produce materials of use on college campuses, in other prisons, by prison advocacy groups, families of persons in prison, etc. So we decided to craft multiple products. Our primary document would be a single voiced, multi-method, rigorous and professionally graphic designed report, available widely on a website (www.changingminds.ws) with quotes and endorsements from people on the political Left and Right. The prisoners wanted Michelle Fine to be the first name, and ‘Missy’ insisted that that was the name she would use. This report was distributed to every governor in the US and all the New York State Senators and members of the Assembly. We would, as well, construct additional essays on feminist methodology (see for instance, Fine et al., 2003) in which our contradictions would be interrogated, and we produced 1000 organizing brochures in English and Spanish, which carried a strong voice of advocacy with demands for justice and action. These
brochures were distributed across a series of community-based organizations, national advocacy groups and colleges/universities. We created (and have sustained for four years) a website where activists, organizers, students, faculty, criminal justice administrators, prisoners and their families can download a full copy of the report, loaded with photos, letters, charts, graphs, cost-benefit analyses and the rich words of the women. To date, the website has been ‘hit’ more than 5000 times, with the California State Department of Corrections ordering 50 copies of the report; feminist and critical education faculty assigning the report in class; and a father whose daughter committed suicide in prison has decided to sponsor a college in prison project, and he too ordered enough copies for a number of administrators in his home state.

As we struggled with the section on who is the ‘we’ of the research collective, Michelle naively offered, ‘What if we write, something like, “We are all women concerned with violence against women; some of us have experienced, most of us have witnessed and all are outraged.”’ To which Donna said, ‘Michelle, please don’t romanticize us. Your writing is eloquent, but you seemed to have left out the part that some of us are here for murder’. Another woman extended the point, ‘And some of us for murder of our children’. The argument was growing clear, ‘When we’re here and not here, in the college and back in our cells, we have to think about the people affected by our crimes. We take responsibility and we need you to represent that as well as our common concerns as women, as feminists, as political . . .’

In prison, as in any institution under external surveillance, insiders know the details of daily life, understand the laser-like penetration of external scrutiny, and are more likely to refuse to simply romanticize that which happens within. Indeed, in our collaborations it has been the prison-based researchers who recognized that our design needed to include dissenting voices, narratives of critique and perspectives from dropouts; prisoners and former prisoners who insist that we talk about responsibility, choices and remorse.

Prison researchers were willing to ride the dialectic of structural and personal explanations, and they were willing to call themselves and each other on behaviors/comments that outsiders might have overlooked, ignored or been nervous about challenging. Thus, prison-based researchers would interject in an interview with another prisoner, ‘Are you kidding, you have changed? You just got a ticket!’ or insist that we interview a correction officer known to be ambivalent about or hostile to the college, or arrange an interview with a recently arrived young woman member of a gang not yet ready for college.

As powerful as PAR has been behind bars, there are cautions. The prisoners were always more vulnerable than we were as outsiders. Their poetry, books, journals, favorite seasonings, letters from home and private documents were searched, ransacked and tossed out when someone in administration decided to exert power or tried to warn the women, in the sado-masochistic rhythm of
prison, about what they were writing. And the critical consciousness that accom-
panies participatory research comes with anger, outrage, and a recognition of
injustice that boils in prison. PAR speaks to an outside world, but often little
inside changes.

Other prisons have been developing college programs, and a number of
other states have relied upon the original model to craft their own. And yet back
at the original site of innovation, where the research took place, the vision has
been radically diminished. The commitments to prisoner participation and loose
sense of democracy have shriveled. There is still college, but the passion and
participatory politics that infused its birth have been stripped away. There is no
‘inmate committee’ to govern the college. While in the past educators or students
could donate used books, we hear about new rules requiring that books come
only from publishers (limiting the number and range of books likely to show up,
and hiking the price of those that do). And, now, although apparently not always
enforced, there is a ‘no hugging policy’.

The question of action/audience for PAR work remains slippery. Some
audiences view the work as more credible because of the diverse author list.
Others listen skeptically because the researchers were prisoners, the data were
qualitative, the story was too painful. At one state legislative hearing, the two of
us (Michelle and María) presented the findings and concluded,

   College in prison is morally important to individuals, families and communities;
   financially wise for the state, and it builds civic engagement and leadership in urban
   communities. In fact, college in prison even saves tax payers money. A conservative
   Republican, as well as your more progressive colleagues, should support these pro-
   grams . . . unless, of course, the point is simply to lock up Black and Brown bodies
   at the Canadian border.

To which one of the more progressive state legislators responded, ‘Doctor, I’m
afraid that is the point. You know that in New York, downstate’s crime is
upstate’s industry.’ That is, the social fabric of New York State is divided by a
relatively white and rural ‘upstate’ and then substantial poverty and communities
of color ‘downstate’ in New York City (with pockets of urban poverty distributed
during the state). One analysis of prisoners suggested that 80 percent of New
York state prisoners come from eight communities in New York City. Thus, the
crime in the city produces the industry and jobs – hotels, bus, movies, restaurants,
correctional personnel, etc. – for the upstate population.

Prisons and their justifications have infected our national consciousness,
our national and the global economy. In modest response, in the midst of a
global struggle against the mass incarceration of people of color, and women in
particular, PAR offers an electric current through which critique and possibility
travel. PAR provides an interior legacy and power – within the prison and outside
– of respect for insider knowledge, and recognition of prisoner authority, expo-
sure of atrocity, a call for public responsibility. Participatory action research projects are born in dissent, strengthened by difference, organized through a bumpy democracy and motivated by a desire for contestation and justice.

Fast forward to 2005: 10 years since Clinton pulled the funds out of college in prison, a research/policy/advocacy group of prisoners, former prisoners, activists and researchers has reconvened to undertake a project on Long Term women incarcerated for violent crimes. Participatory across spaces and times, and a different women’s prison, we will be designing a project that removes the veil from women who have committed or been charged with violent crimes, for them to tell the stories of crime, responsibility and gender as they would tell them. At the first session a number of long termers ‘within’ have asked that those of us on the outside collect and disseminate their narratives and also investigate what has happened to their male co-defendants . . . so many of whom were released while the women remain in prison; that we investigate how it is that women plead guilty while men refuse to plead and go to trial, receiving often lighter sentences; that women ‘hid the gun’, men pulled the trigger and they both got long sentences; that men ‘knew enough to turn state’s evidence and rat on the others’ and so got reduced sentences, while women knew little and wandered off to prison; that men who go to prison have women who raise their children, and women who go to prison often lose their kids to foster care, with terminated parental rights – a lifetime sentence.

We have been working with the Long Termers group within, and are creating a Long Termers group of now-released women, all convicted of violent crimes, to determine the gender politics of sentencing, long sentences, parole decisions, and the collateral damage of the prison industrial complex. Another current of PAR begins, to pierce the national anesthesia surrounding our policies of mass incarceration.

**On action: locating ourselves in longitudes and latitudes of PAR**

To situate our PAR projects in the stretchy zone of global political struggles, we like to think that we work on two planes at once. Our PAR prison work circulates across meridians, maybe a latitude, of local and global networks, institutions and social movements tied specifically to the struggle at hand, in this case, the prison industrial complex and prisoners’ access to education. While every research project is situated in a specific place or series of places, we work deliberately to join our projects politically and theoretically with other prison reform, youth organizing, and social justice projects.

*Changing Minds* was published on 10 September 2001 (Fine et al., 2001). The report has been distributed at the Critical Resistance: Education not Prisons
conference, as well as in New Zealand, Wales, Alaska, Denver, California and Chicago and at activist and scholarly meetings on prisons, schools, higher education, critical epistemologies and methods. We have published articles as a research collective on the findings, the methods and the significance of higher education in the struggle for broadened conceptions of Affirmative Action (see Torre, 2005). We have also presented on this work to more traditionally administrative and faith-based organizations dedicated to parole reform, education reform (in and out of prison), humane treatment, reduced sentencing, etc., meetings of governors, legislative assistants and even correctional groups presumably interested in ‘what works’.

Since that time, in the US and in New York State in particular (as well as California soon thereafter), there have been some sharp and some subtle movements toward education in prison. In part because states have noticed that their budgets had been hijacked by the prison industrial complex, there has been a slight softening of the ‘get tough on crime’ rhetoric. We collaborate and find energy in the lateral capillaries of social struggle and policy change to which our projects can attach, be transformed and educate.

Our PAR projects also travel along a second meridian, maybe a longitude of universities and public media spaces in the US and beyond for democratic, critical inquiry. These spaces are increasingly under siege. Material resources are depleting and sites for academic freedom and critical social exchange are drying up. As students and colleagues work under surveillance most prominently in Middle Eastern Studies departments, cultural studies and the critical social sciences, university-based PAR projects squat in a space where we can speak back to the intellectual shrinkage and privatization of higher education.

As public media bend to the Right, radical newsletters, radio programming, television and academic departments are under-funded and/or threatened. As the RAE colonizes the academy in England, the National Association of Scholars infects universities in the US. As conservative think tanks proliferate, research funds privatize and militarize. We witness a not-so-slow drip feed that narrows, under severe threat, that which is studiable, askable and publishable.

A neo-liberal paradigm is sweeping through the academy, publishing industry and research foundations, conservatizing arguments about what constitutes knowledge, validity, subjectivity, democracy, teaching, academic freedom and research for meaning. The grounds of knowledge construction are shifting seismically from under, as ‘expertise’ whitens, privatizes, and moves far north of the site of embodied/oppressed knowing (Gaventa, 1993). The further from the site of experience and the less ‘contaminated’ by critique, the more ‘reliable’ the knowledge gleaned. Academic journals publish and the politics of textbooks roll forward.

Common sense is being reconstituted before our eyes, through our schools, the media, the state and the orchestrated global shifts to the Right. PAR work
nourishes, and is nourished, at the vibrant and exhausting intersection of local and transnational social movements for democracy, difference and justice.

**References**


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