

## preface

AS WE PREPARE THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of *Feminist Studies* on women and prisons for publication, the abuse of Iraqis detained at Abu Ghraib prison has come to light. Stories and images witnessing the sexual humiliation and other types of abuse visited upon Iraqis by U.S. and British military personnel have been roundly criticized by those who recognize the legitimacy of the Geneva Conventions even in the midst of an illegitimate war. Most of what has been reported has involved male detainees whose nakedness has been seared into our memories as their basic humanity has been violated in the name of the War on Terrorism. Less visible, however, have been the women held in Abu Ghraib who, according to Luke Harding writing in the (London) *Guardian* (12 May 2004) and Seymour Hersh writing in the *New Yorker* (17 May 2004), have also reportedly been sexually abused, raped, humiliated, photographed naked, intimidated, even “disappeared.” Jasbir K. Puar’s essay, “Abu Ghraib: Arguing against Exceptionalism,” and two protest letters by the International Women Count Network and the U.K. groups Black Women’s Rape Action Project and Women against Rape, reproduced in our News and Views section, articulate strong feminist responses to the situation at Abu Ghraib.

Despite the evidence of the abuse of both female and male detainees, the media continues to focus primarily on the abuse meted out to the men. Women are included, if at all, almost as afterthoughts. Although the majority of those both detained and abused are men, the numbers cannot be the only reason women have been less visible as victims of these human rights abuses. The stories and images of men as victims of sexual abuse, humiliation, and intimidation may seem particularly egregious because such treatment challenges their gender identity, making their feminization a central part of the military’s tactics in breaking down the Iraqis and bringing them under control. If this is the case, then the abuse of female detainees is all too ordinary. There is little to distinguish the women inside and outside Abu Ghraib prison other than the prison walls and the windowless 2.5 meter by 1.5 meter cells in which they are held.

This ordinariness of being women and vulnerable to abuse, humiliation, and intimidation whether actually incarcerated or theoretically free is the situation faced by many of the women whose stories are told in this special issue. For some women, life in prison is a refuge from even greater oppressions in their home communities; for others it is a sudden initiation into a terrifying subculture; for many, unfortunately, it is the continuation of immersion in a toxic and inegalitarian society. According to Beth Richie's review essay of feminist ethnographies of women in prison, the situation of incarcerated women reveals "nearly all of the manifestations of gender domination that feminist scholars and activists have traditionally concerned themselves with—exploited labor, inadequate health care, dangerous living conditions, physical violence, and sexual assault. . . ." compounded together in a "convergence of disadvantage, discrimination, and despair."

In addition, as several articles included here demonstrate, imprisoned women face formidable problems of family separation, denials of citizenship, human rights abuses, and an institutionalization of racism, classism, and homophobia as well as sexism that distinguishes the United States as the most concentrated prison society among developed nations. This issue of *Feminist Studies* vividly illustrates what incarceration means to the women behind bars, to those who work in prisons, and to the circles of women that include former offenders, their families, and all the rest of us. As a whole, by presenting the words of prisoners, prison workers, scholars, and anti-prison activists, this issue achieves the goal that Rachel Roth holds out for her article's investigation of prisoners' abortion rights, "to bring women in prison from the margins to the mainstream" of feminist scholarship.

Much of the writing in this volume chronicles women's efforts to challenge the ordinary inhumanity that many experience as integral to being women. For those women incarcerated in U.S. jails and prisons, this struggle is documented beginning as early as the first third of the twentieth century in institutions such as the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills. According to Sarah Potter, in her 2003 FEMINIST STUDIES AWARD-winning article, Bedford Hills was a place where prison personnel sought to control the sexuality of white working-class women, many of whom were imprisoned in a sex-segregated institution because of sex-related charges. Within the confines of Bedford Hills, the interracial relationships about which Potter writes were seen as deviant

for white women but less so for black women. In this way, the racial, sexual, and class hierarchies of the world outside the prison were the foundation on which prison policies and practices were based. This, despite the reality that many of the women in Bedford Hills sought care, sexual satisfaction, loyalty, and devotion in relations that “did not necessarily follow the same conventions as [the] middle-class heterosexuality that incarceration was intended to instill.”

For the women at the center of Rachel Roth’s research, the ordinariness of women’s inhumanity is captured by “the current context of mass incarceration . . . and dwindling support for poor mothers . . . [which makes the issue of] imprisoned women’s access to abortion . . . a significant problem of social justice.” These are thought to be the most unworthy women whose apparent criminality and incarceration conspire with the race, sex, and class hierarchies, which, for many, make incarceration virtually inevitable. This, in a context where “social welfare policy disadvantages women with prison records at the very time that criminal justice policy ensures that more women will experience incarceration.”

Deborah Labelle and Sheryl Pimlott Kubiak also consider how the ordinariness of being women is particularly “cruel and unusual” for “[t]he women who fill . . . prisons and jails,” who are “[o]ften extremely impoverished and disproportionately women of color. The women in Michigan about whom Labelle and Kubiak write have used the courts to challenge gender discrimination in the education and rehabilitation programs offered by the Michigan Department of Corrections (DOC), as well as to “create a more equitable environment for female prisoners.” Their successes, however, are threatened by the Michigan DOC’s misuse of legal notions of gender equality to support gender blindness “disregarding all gender differences for both prisoners and staff.” Many of these women found themselves sexually abused, humiliated, and intimidated. When they fought back, male prison guards claimed their rights had been violated, rendering “the particular vulnerability of the female inmates . . . irrelevant.” In this way, the Michigan DOC and the courts reinforced the ordinariness of such threats to the personal and bodily integrity of women, in general, and the disproportionately poor women of color in Michigan’s jails and prisons, in particular. These are the women who should not only expect such treatment but also not expect the law either to recognize or to remedy any resulting injuries.

The prison system is filled with catch-22 provisions for its inmates. One that is especially heart-rending concerns the challenges faced by incarcerated mothers with children in foster care, as Ronnie Halperin and Jennifer L. Harris describe in their article. First, incarcerated mothers—a high percentage of women in prison—are separated from their children by being locked up. Then, often, they lose permanent custody because the rules for family reintegration depend on birth mothers being actively involved in decisions about their children and in keeping contact. As Halperin and Harris point out, “the barriers these mothers face in parenting from prison are compounded by a child welfare system not structured to meet their needs,” and recent child welfare policies have made the situation worse.

Another group facing monumental difficulties from the criminal justice system as well as from society at large is young women in trouble. Legal activist Bernardine Dohrn describes the difficult situation of “Girls Locked Up,” often for status offenses that would not be crimes were the girls of age. The problems of poor education and poor resources for poor girls are compounded by the for-profit prison industry that thrives on their immiseration. Even more than adults, incarcerated girls are disproportionately impoverished and likely to be African American. Dohrn reveals the dramatic increase in the number of girls incarcerated over the past decade despite the drop in youth crime, and she details the histories that characterize such girls, overwhelmingly ones of sexual and physical abuse, neglect, and victimization by adults. Contrary to the intention of feminist backers of domestic violence laws, many such laws have been used to institutionalize adolescent girls in conflict with their families. Faced with these appalling facts, Dohrn joins other feminist activists in outlining ten plausible steps to address the needs of abused girls and to provide them with “gender-specific, developmentally sound, culturally sensitive” family and neighborhood programs that would reduce our society’s reliance on prison as a place to lock up people with social problems without solving them.

The issues facing women in the prison system are not limited to those who are serving time. Indeed, as Rebecca B. Rank demonstrates, women who work in this part of the criminal legal system face the difficulties of being women in a system that is fundamentally gendered male. Initially drawn to the work by her need to earn enough money to make ends meet, Rank has much in common with many of the women with whom she came into contact. As a parole and probation officer, she works with

both women and men offenders and ex-offenders, and presents us with another view of their gendered incarceration experience. On a women's prison, she writes: "[it is] about the saddest place I've ever been, largely due to its climate of suppressed rage, depression, shame, and secrecy." These are the very differences the gender-blindness of the Michigan DOC cannot see. Today Rank is retired from her position with the State DOC and has become a private counselor who specializes in women's issues where she tries "to impart [her] faith and certainty that life is much more than a passive experience—that we aren't just bystanders, that we can navigate, construct, and cultivate a life."

At first glance, Rank's optimism seems illusory for those women prisoners who provide labor, the "central component in the business of prisons." Marilyn Buck, however, observes that for some prisoners, the decision not to submit to prison labor is an act of resistance. For the vast majority of the women in prison, work is not optional, "because they are forced to work by the prison keepers, under penalty of segregation units and loss of privileges that are ordinary assumptions of life in the broader society." The line between liberty and incarceration is blurred as, according to Buck, "[w]e are forced to work in the degrading conditions women all over the world suffer." But even for those who appear to submit, work may be liberating because "[a]s women we work to be useful in our own eyes."

U.S. prisons punish and degrade the incarcerated rather than rehabilitate them, yet incarcerated women also demonstrate vast reserves of resilience and hope. Several articles in this issue describe creative encounters between feminist activists and incarcerated women. Perhaps best known of such efforts is Rhodessa Jones's "Medea Project" of staging plays based on mythological plots with incarcerated women. As the dramaturg and videographer for one season of Jones's performances, Sara L. Warner describes the mythological resonances of "The Medea Project." Warner introduced the incarcerated women to the myth of Inanna of ancient Sumer, now modern Iraq, and watched as the prisoners internalized and recreated Inanna's losses and loyalties on her harrowing trip to the underworld. The incarcerated women who already felt themselves in hell, however, had difficulties imagining the ways up away from addiction, dependency, poverty, and abuse. Surprisingly, Warner sees the "efficacy of the Medea Project . . . not in its success, but in its failure" as it warns all of us of the stringent limits on our social imaginations.

The second 2003 FEMINIST STUDIES AWARD winner, Megan Sweeney, uses a recent novel, Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*, rather than an ancient myth, as a way of organizing her encounters with women in prison. The internal monologue of an abused African American woman who commits an apparently senseless murder, *Eva's Man* has perplexed both traditional and feminist literary critics, but incarcerated women responded to the novel strongly as a realist text. Although "the pathologized and criminalized figure of the African American woman haunts public debate about welfare reform, single parent families, and the war on drugs," Sweeney notes, "explicit discussions of black women as agents of crime remain relatively scarce." Some incarcerated readers of the novel focused on Eva's repressed rage, others on her conflicted sexuality. Through a process of "transformative listening," Sweeney claims, their responses can illuminate how "imprisoned readers variously reproduce, resist, and rework . . . discourses about women, crime, and violence."

Another project involving feminist academics, students, and incarcerated women is described in Ann Folwell Stanford's article, "More Than Just Words." With poetry as a vehicle for subversion, resistance, and resilience, Stanford documents the creative efforts of women in Cook County jail to define themselves through words that "knit broken narratives, break through silence, and create new worlds, new visions." By creating and recreating community on terms fundamentally different from those contemplated by the system, the women with whom Stanford worked wrote "in a context of silence and invisibility (to the outside world, to the guards, and at times to each other and to themselves). . . ." The writing helped to foster a "notion of collectivity [that] is antithetical to the overall system of incarceration which relies on detainees' dependence on authority (or the spectacle of authority) to maintain control." Through words, the writers saw the only difference between themselves and guards as being "that after eight hours,/you can leave. . . . Without your navy blues/and your silver Smith & Wesson, you'd probably be here/also learning some type of lesson." The creative writing process allowed them to understand that "my sisters had nothing to do but what they were doing [gossiping and fighting on the tier], not realizing that in a sense our lives are at stake, held hostage by the courts and by our ignorance."

Film director Cheryl Dunye produced a film melodrama, *A Stranger Inside*, about women in prison for the television channel HBO. The unlikely

heroine of the film is a young African American lesbian who deliberately has herself transferred from a Youth Authority to a state penitentiary in order to be reunited with her mother, who is incarcerated there. In an interview with Maria St. John, Dunye discusses her goals in making the film. Although a fiction film, *A Stranger Inside* benefited from the example of the Medea Project and from Dunye's workshops and interviews with women inmates, lawyers, and social workers. Focusing on a mother-daughter bond remade in prison conditions, the film emphasizes the human relationships among women in prison as a way to make the lives of incarcerated women "less strange to the nation that contains and disowns" them.

The reality of life in prison is also brought to the outside in the photo essay, "Voices in Time," by Salome Chasnoff. It illustrates a multimedia installation recreating the constrained spaces of prison, which has been exhibited in Chicago and surrounding areas. "How do homes of pain mark us?" Chasnoff asks, as she questions the caging of people as the routine American response to crime. She annotates her visual report with the first person narratives of the imprisoned women who must live together under constant humiliation, surveillance, discomfort, and often untreated ill health.

Beth Richie, herself an activist scholar in the movement for alternatives to incarceration and restorative justice, reviews feminist books about women and prisons that "take readers beyond the bleak statistics and the broad political and economic analyses directly into the lives of incarcerated women as they tell" their stories of "lives behind bars." Such a story concludes this issue. In "Counting Down the Days," Barbara Saunders captures both "lasts" and "firsts," as she remembers her reentry into the "free" world after years behind bars. The lasts are part of the game those who face imminent release play as they mark milestones, such as "the last time I have to be stripped searched to go back to the yard from visiting." The firsts signify the ways in which the world has changed since having been locked up and the "beginning of re-establishing [one]self in the free world." For Saunders, freedom means coming to terms with prison having saved her life and being the only way that she could truly be free. She declares that, "[i]f I hadn't gone to prison, an abusive, alcoholic husband most certainly would have killed me. If I hadn't gone to prison, I would have kept running from my past and never slowed down long enough to evaluate my life. . . . Now I'm happy. Now I'm free."

The efforts of formerly incarcerated women to build new lives are hampered by social distancing, shame, and stigma. One goal of this issue of *Feminist Studies* is to reduce the distance between women inside and outside those bars by drawing wider attention to the unique victimization, agency, and talents of incarcerated women. Another goal is to expand feminist academic theorizing through testing it against the situation of incarcerated women for whom the topics of feminist theory are living, insistent matters—including the meanings of voice and silencing, conditions for individual agency, the institutionalization of oppression, and the intersections among race, class, gender, and global economic forces. More intensely and with fewer resources, incarcerated women face all the problems of those of us who remain outside and responsible to them.

Lisa Crooms and Judith Kegan Gardiner,  
for the editors

ERRATUM:

In volume 30, no. 1 (Spring 2004), Paola Bacchetta and Sandra Gunning should have been identified as co-authors of the preface. We apologize for our incorrect attribution.