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A space for co-constructing counter stories under surveillance

María Elena Torre, Michelle Fine, Kathy Boudin, Iris Bowen, Judith Clark, Donna Hylton, Migdalia Martinez, 'Missy', Rosemarie A. Roberts, Pamela Smart and Debora Upegui

Using our experiences as members of a participatory research committee (from the City University of New York Graduate Center and the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility) documenting the impact of college in a maximum security prison, this essay illustrates the power of Participatory Action Research in the construction of counter stories. We raise for discussion a set of theoretical, methodological and ethical challenges that emerged from the co-production of counter stories under surveillance: the creation of a critical space for producing 'counter knowledge', the co-mingling of counter and dominant discourses, the negotiation of power over and within research in prison, and the opening of a dialogue between counter stories and public policy makers.

> We are not just 'insiders', which denotes place. Most of us feel acutely responsible for the crimes that brought us here, and for the impact of our actions on others. We truly do feel for the public's anger about crime and feel responsible to address the legitimacy of that anger in our work. But it is hard for us to climb out of our own sense of responsibility, to feel entitled to claim a critical voice. Our work with outside researchers, who brought their sense of freedom to level clear critiques of social policy, so

long as it was grounded in the data, stretched our capacities to think the unimaginable, to be socially responsible and critical. (An inmate researcher.)

We write together on our experience as members of a participatory research committee documenting the impact of college in a maximum security correctional facility to illustrate the power of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the construction of counter stories. As researchers we took seriously the rich potential of PAR to unearth critical voices from society's margins and to speak back to social policy. Among us, we worked to create what Maxine Greene (1995) calls 'openings' where what could be, is sought; where what has been, is critiqued; and where what is, is troubled. Taken as a methodological, theoretical and ethical stance, PAR builds knowledge in these 'openings' through its implicit questioning of accepted ideas and its creation of spaces for discussions that call for new explanations for common understandings. Our work together was designed to produce a document that would speak back to communities and to policymakers engaged in the expansion of what is popularly called the 'prison industrial complex'.

Researching and writing within the context of the United States, where more than 2,000,000 Americans are now living behind bars in prisons and jails across the country and where our president is the former governor of the state with the highest death row execution rate, our project is steeped within what appears to be a current nationally accepted narrative of 'discipline and punish'. In this social historical moment the dominant narrative goes something like this: *Bad people do bad things. With vigilance, we must catch these people, try and punish them. These people chose to commit crimes and locking them in prison and jail cells is the only way to protect our families and communities.* It is in this political moment that we had the opportunity to construct, together, a research project in which we could document the impact of college in prison – on the women, the prison environment, the women's children, and the women's post-release outcomes.

Motivated by the appeal and urgency of counter stories, in the shadow of the election of President George W. Bush in the United States, we raise in this essay a set of challenges that emerged from our critical practice behind bars. We have found PAR (itself a counter story to traditional research methods) to be a useful tool in excavating counter stories. However, as might be expected, researching within a prison context, the counter stories that emerge bear the complex markings of prison itself. Thus, in this essay we tell a doubled counter story. First, we reflect on our own sense of PAR as a practice that challenges research commitments to objectivity, truth and distance. Second, we reflect with humility on our naïve sense that counter stories from women in prison would sit somehow untainted, untouched and in clean opposition to dominant discourses. What we learned, instead, is that PAR is not immune from (but indeed wrestles with) questions of objectivity, truth, distance, intimacy and vulnerability; and that critical stories are always (and at once) in tension with dominant stories, neither fully oppositional nor untouched.

The context of the research

The 1980s and 1990s, in the United States and around the world, were decades of substantial public and political outcry about crime, and about criminals. During these years, stiffer penalties were enforced for crimes, prisons were built at unprecedented rates, parole was tougher to achieve, 'three strikes and you're out' bills were passed and college programs were no longer publicly funded for inmates. Indeed, with the signing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994, then President William Jefferson Clinton and the United States Congress arranged that all federal dollars which had enabled women and men in prison to attend college (in the form of Pell grants1) would be discontinued for inmate use. It was then up to the states to finalise the closing of most prison based college programs around the nation. At Bedford Hills Correctional Facility (BHCF), a maximum security facility with a general population of 600 women, Mercy College had co-ordinated a vibrant college program for over fifteen years. In 1995, this program, like over 340 others nation-wide, was closed. This decision provoked a sea of disappointment, despair and outrage from the women at Bedford Hills who had been actively engaged in higher education and in GED/ABE preparation. Within months, however, a large coalition of community volunteers deeply concerned about the loss of college, working with the prison administration and inmates at BHCF, began to design a new model that did not rely upon federal or state monies. With the leadership of the Superintendent, inmates at the facility, the president of a New York City college and local activists, higher education was restored in 1997, through the voluntary contributions of a private consortium of colleges and universities. The

College Bound Program has been in operation for four years, granting bachelor's degrees in Sociology from Marymount Manhattan College. Approximately 33 per cent of women at the prison participate in either the college or pre-college program, on top of their regular prison jobs. All of those who are enrolled in college contribute the equivalent of a month's wages for the privilege of access to higher education.

With the plans to restore college to the prison came a strong commitment to a multi-method evaluation of the impact of college on the women, the prison environment, their children and their post-release outcomes (see Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton, Martinez, Missy, Roberts, Smart & Upegui, 2001). A research team from the Graduate and University Center of the City University of New York (the Graduate Center), an inmate research team from BHCF, and a Program Research Specialist from the New York Department of Correctional Services (NYDOCS) collaborated to produce a report on the impact of college in prison.

Though the College Bound Program operates within the current political climate which, mildly put, is hostile to federally funded prison higher education programs, a look into the recent past reveals that this climate represents a new shift in attitudes towards incarceration and incarcerated individuals. The philosophical attitudes in corrections which understood prisons as sites of rehabilitation that were commonplace in the 1970s – flawed though they were – and under which prison GED, vocational programs, and college programs flourished, are now seen as radical thinking. College at Bedford Hills during the Mercy tenure was almost a 'normal' prison program. However, as the dominant discourse about prisons has shifted, 'rehabilitation' looks like radical language now that punishment is the explicit project of incarceration. Sadly, that which is truly radical, moving beyond the individual who committed a particular crime to a critique of the social systems of capitalism, racism, patriarchy and heterosexism which play crucial roles in sustaining poverty, inadequate schools and housing, the drug trade and crime, rarely interrupts the national dominant conversation on prisons.

College at Bedford Hills

College Bound was conceptualised with pillars of strong, ongoing participation by prison administration, staff, inmates, faculty and volunteers. Inmates, in particular, are expected to 'give back' in any

number of ways. They teach, mentor, pay the equivalent of a month's wages for tuition while in prison, create and facilitate educational and support groups, and demonstrate high levels of community engagement once they are released (see Fine et al., 2001). Structurally, the design of the college program called for the college administrators at BHCF to meet regularly with the prison administration, the Inmate Committee, and a representative of the Board of the college program, to create and sustain a 'safe' context for serious conversation – reflection, revision and re-imagining of the college-in-prison. It was felt to be important to build a program with core participation from every constituency because many, including the long-termers who witnessed the loss of college, did not want the younger women to ever take the program for granted, assume its permanence, forget its fragility, view it as an entitlement. All felt it important for the younger women – that is, those newer to the facility – to understand college as a privilege, hard earned, easily lost and worth struggling for. Little did we know that the forms of participation within the college would emerge, powerfully, as one of the central positive outcomes of the college program. That is, women who have for the most part spent the better (or worst) part of their lives under the violent thumbs of poverty, racism and men, could in college 'hear my own voice' or 'see my own signature' or 'make my own decisions' – re-imagine themselves as agents who make choices, take responsibility, create change for self and others (e.g., family, children and younger women at BHCF), and design a future not over-determined by the past.

At its heart, this college program has not simply been about the taking of courses, but about deep immersion in an intellectual and ethical community of scholars. The physical space of the Learning Center – equipped with non-networked computers (Internet access is prohibited), contributed books, magazines, newspapers, flags from colleges and universities in the consortium – holds what Seymour Sarason (1974) would call the 'sense of community', a place where, the 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'. This intellectual community also spills out onto the 'yard' where you can overhear study groups on Michel Foucault, qualitative research, and Alice Walker; and into the cell blocks where the ticking of typewriter keys can be heard late into the night and a 'young inmate may knock softly on [my] wall, at midnight, asking how to spell or punctuate ... '

For the women at Bedford Hills – 80 per cent of whom carry scars of childhood sexual abuse, terrible educational biographies, tough family and community backgrounds, long lists of social and personal betrayals – growing back the capacity to join a community, engage with other women, give back and trust are remarkable social and psychological accomplishments.

Thus, when conceiving the research project that would document the impact of college on the women, the prison environment and the world outside prison, it seemed all too obvious that a participatory design behind bars would be nearly impossible – and essential. With this knowledge a group of researchers came together, four from the Graduate Center and seven from BHCF, and drawing on a variety of methods, embarked on a research agenda2 designed to answer three questions: 1. *What is the impact of the college experience on inmate students?* For which we examined the following outcomes: academic, social and psychological effects; academic achievement and persistence; sense of responsibility for past and future; personal transformation and civic engagement in prison and beyond. 2. *What is the impact of the college experience on the prison environment?* For which we examined the following areas: prison disciplinary environment; prison climate; correctional officers' views of and experiences with the prison; attitudes of women not in the college program about college and teachers' views of the college program. 3. *What is the impact of the college experience beyond college: on reincarceration rates and post-release outcomes for women who participated in college and have returned home?* For which we examined the following outcomes post-release: economic well-being; health; civic participation; relations with family and friends and reincarceration rates.

A space for counter work

In the remainder of this essay we identify four moments in our work that define, for us, the complex nature of critical psychological work, especially in the co-production of counter stories with communities under surveillance. We work through these four moments as though they are chronological or linear, when in fact, they are neither. We begin, first, with the mechanics of creating a critical mass of 'indigenous' – that is, inmate – researchers and carving a critical space for 'counter knowledge'. We move, next, to reflecting on the mischievous co-mingling of counter and dominant discourses – our first big surprise. We travel, third, to reveal the strains of hierarchy, domination and surveillance that infiltrated even inside our research team, never immune to the larger setting of prison. And fourth, we review our experience of trying to present this work to a State legislative forum, only to hear the ultimate counter story – that public policy, in the twenty-first century, is steadfastly about punishment and privatisation, and that neither social science nor moral persuasion is sufficient to shift the terms of the debate. Indeed, that the mass imprisonment of youth and young adults of colour, and the rise of women in prison, is not a cognitive problem.

1. Building counter knowledge

With the wisdom of C. Wright Mills (1959) and Franz Fanon (1967), and buoyed by the commitments of participatory researchers before us (Fine et al., 2001), we began our work with an understanding that full participation of all researchers requires common and complementary skills, understandings, trust and respect. Artificial collaboration would have been easy to accomplish. Simply having inmates around the table would have been an exercise in what Nancy Fraser (1990) recognises as the bourgeois version of a public sphere: inviting political unequals to the table and calling it democracy. A number of the women from inside the prison were already published (Boudin, 1993; Clark, 1995), but most were not. Therefore, from the start, we committed to working through questions of power, trust and skill by offering a set of courses on research methods within the prison facility, an undergraduate course and a graduate level seminar. In the undergraduate course, students were assigned a final project in which they would have to generate a specific question of personal interest under the larger umbrella question, 'How does college impact the women in the facility, the prison environment and the women/children post-release?' Once questions were formed and reformed, each inmate interviewed at least five other women about her question, and then analysed, interpreted and wrote up her results. What was profound about this experience – a simple exercise in building a cadre of 'inmate researchers' – was that the women came to see their personal experiences as fundamentally social and political. And they acquired research experience.

In the graduate seminar, the same kinds of social scaffolding occurred. Personal problems of 'having a crazy neighbour who screams all night' provoked researchable questions about the history and poli-

tics of mental health and prisons. An offhand remark about the proliferation of gangs in women's prisons sparked a rich theoretical discussion of the power of college and other programs to create intellectual and political spaces for personal and community engagement.

Thus, a crucial feature of participatory work that facilitates the production of counter knowledges is the building of a community of researchers. This means the building of shared skills, respect, trust and common language. This does not necessarily mean, however, the building of consensus.

Creating space for dissent and insider knowledge

As indigenous researchers (Smith, 1999) and PAR researchers have long recognised, insiders carry knowledge, critique and a line of vision that is not automatically accessible to outsiders (QSE, 2000; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993) and that often runs counter to the dominant discourse. There were many ways in which insider knowledge shaped this project. First, prison staff and administrators, as well as inmates, simply know things that outsiders don't. Formal and informal procedures, lines of authority, practices and their consequences, for instance. Second, insiders understand the knotty connections between discrete features of a community that outsiders might erroneously see as separate and divisible. Understanding life at the intersections, as Kimberle Crenshaw (1995) has so beautifully articulated, is critical to the sustenance of an organisation like the College Bound Program and can be perversely misunderstood by researchers who work to extract 'variables' from the tightly woven fabrics of organisational life. And third, insiders understand the power and politics of privilege, privacy, surveillance and vulnerability.

Privacy, vulnerability and surveillance

Women living in prison have little privacy. Layering a participatory research project atop this absence of privacy seemed problematic to The Graduate Center researchers. Even in this facility, one nationally recognised as respectful, with opportunities for inmate participation and verbal commitment to women's growth – even here – during our time in the facility, security concerns give rise to the searching of women's diaries and books and the removal of women's notes and poetry. Questions of where to store the data and still provide access to the inmates for analysis and interpretation plagued us continuously as outsiders. Indeed at one point, one of the inmate researchers asked the appropriate question about exploitation, 'So we just collect the data with you, and then you get to analyse and interpret it?'

It was clear that although all of the inside interviews were co-conducted by an inmate and a Graduate Center researcher (inmates are not allowed to tape-record each other without a 'civilian' present), Graduate Center researchers would interview the correctional officers. Some inmates we interviewed wanted to change their names for the final report and others demanded that their original names be kept intact, pointing out that in too many instances they have been erased from public memory. At many moments in our work, we would need a document, a report, or materials from offices around the prison. When an inmate would ask for such information, there might be nervous caution about giving her requested documents, and yet when one of the Graduate Center researchers would ask, she would more often be told, 'take it – return it whenever you finish'. The realisation of being in a prison, and our outsider denial about prison, set upon the group of us. Making these inequalities explicit pushed our collective thinking about the 'freedoms' (access, privilege, privacy, unregulated time, space, personal computers) which nurture (and we thought were necessary for) knowledge production.

2. A counter story from behind bars – the co-mingling of dominant and critical discourses

As PAR researchers committed to social justice we expected counter stories about prison to proliferate. As we began our research within the facility, we worried about protecting the voices of critique. Nevertheless, far more vibrant and articulate were the counter stories about life outside prison, particularly for poor women of colour. Women inside and out often used the language of dominant discourses in describing prison as a site of 'rehabilitation' and their 'former selves' before prison as 'awful'. Across our interviews and focus groups, inmates described themselves as they entered prison with harsh language: angry, anti-social, drug abusing, disrespectful both to self and others, having little to offer the world. Using words like, 'obnoxious', 'unworthy' and 'negative', their language mirrored the dominant and assaultive images of felons and prisoners. These characterisations were typically followed by descriptions of 'complete' and 'total' personal changes. 'New selves' were spoken of as 'improved', 'working', 'moti-

vated', 'knowledgeable' and worthy of pride. Many of the women interviewed credited college with facilitating a personal change from their old ways to their new (read better) way of life. It was almost as if prison had 'saved' them, redeeming their once vilified selves, with the emergence of new 'positive', 'productive' and 'good' selves.

> I never thought I could amount to anything, but now I not only improved myself but I can answer questions and help my children with knowledge I never had before. (Karen)

> I used to be an abuser. You know, like I used to deal, you know, do drugs and stuff. And look at me now. I'm like, you know, I'm working, I'm very productive ... (Debra)

> When I first came to Bedford Hills, I was a chronic disciplinary problem, getting tickets [issued for disciplinary infractions] back to back. I had a very poor attitude as well, I was rude and obnoxious for no reason, I did not care about anything or anyone ... Then I became motivated to participate in a number of programs, one of which was college. I started to care about getting in trouble and became conscious of the attitude I had that influenced my negative behaviours ... College is a form of rehabilitation, one of the best. (Denise)

> 'Cause we were some wild kids when we were younger. We were angry. We didn't understand the system. This was our first time ever being in trouble. So all we wanted to do was fight. We didn't interact with anybody, we weren't social. So now [we're] like totally different. We look forward to coming to college ... And it's like I changed, just totally changed. And my sister came [to college] a couple of months afterwards and changed, but we did it together. (Erica describing herself and her sister early in their incarceration.)

Initially, the Graduate Center members of the research team bristled at the women's trashing of their own past lives and worried about this language of internalised self-blame and self-hatred. The inmate researchers, on the other hand, heard in the same transcripts a language of redemption, echoing the therapeutic talk characteristic of counselling, 12-step programs, support groups, church and even of discussions about upcoming parole board hearings, wherein narratives of old 'bad', 'unworthy', 'negative' selves are traded in for narratives of new 'positive', 'productive', 'good' selves.

> [W]hen I first came here I had a chip on my shoulder that I wanted somebody to knock off ... I stayed in trouble. I was disrespectful. I had no self-respect, no respect for others. And it took a while for me to change gradually through the years ... when I started going to college that was like the key point for me of rehabilitation, of changing myself. And nobody did it for me, I did it for myself ... And I went and I did it and I accomplished things that I didn't think I could accomplish. (Roz)

We worried that while we expected counter stories, these self narratives actually echoed the dominant discourse – attacking women in poverty, women of colour, and indeed women in prison. As some of us grew concerned about the nasty relationship between discourses of redemption and derogation of poor women and women of colour, others of us – inmate researchers – reminded the research team of a simple fact: crimes had been committed, by most of the women with whom we spoke. The discourse of redemption, it was suggested, serves as a powerful coping strategy for women desperate to understand themselves as separate from the often destructive behaviour that led them to prison. By staying within a story of two separate selves, women can assert judgement over their past actions without having to face the pain of integrating complicated histories – past selves now despised, past behaviour now regretted – into their present selves. The task of analysis then became to look 'beneath the covers' for 'connective tissue' between past and present selves, for instances where women reflect critically on their lives, recognising past, present and future selves in relation to each other and within social context, both in and outside the prison, incorporating a sense of agency and responsibility, both to self and others.

> [B]ut then just to sit down and read it all and discover that you don't even like half of this stuff here about you. But this is you. You know, you from you. And it was like, oooh! ... so I [re]wrote it and I read it and I reread it and I rewrote it and I sort of like condensed it [from 20 pages] into about six pages ... it was like really deep because it was no escaping then. (Rhonda, on documenting her past for her clemency petition.)

> It's still in my character, but I don't let it come out. It doesn't prove anything. Before, I didn't care. Now I see I can achieve, do anything I put

my mind to. I have matured ... I can set examples now. (Sondra, addressing past behaviour that led to disciplinary problems.)

I can think and talk about my victim now. It's not just 'the bitch cut me and I cut her back'. Even that idea comes out differently now, 'the girl cut me and I chose to strike back'. Those words weren't in me before, but now, just having the words to articulate things, puts them into perspective differently. (Tanisha)

I know the decision to continue my education will help me in the long run, yet my aspiration is to somehow help the young women who are coming into prison in record breaking numbers. My past allows me to speak from experience, and the academic knowledge I have obtained allows me to move forward productively, hopefully enabling me to help these younger women recognise and reach their potentials. (Crystal)

With this added layer of analysis, it became clear that while little from the outside seeps through prison walls, dominant discourses do, carried on the tongues of Correctional Officers, Prison Administrators, State Parole Boards, family members and the women themselves. Further, as inmates are under specific attack by these dominant discourses, they are well aware of the social and political moment which, it may be argued, demands proof of remorse before stories of personal change may be heard. In other words, if a self narrative begins with a statement of remorse, then a critical voice, a social critique, and perhaps most subversive in the prison context, a claim to personal agency, may be smuggled in. In the absence of remorse, no such hearing is permitted. What we initially understood as redemption stories, are not just narrative techniques, sequences used by the women as a way to make sense of a major life transition as Dan McAdams and P.J. Bowman (in press) suggest; nor are they an internalised expression of self-hatred. Rather, they are strategic and sincere points of entry into a hostile public conversation, paving the way for an expression of their power to think, speak and act as fully engaged citizens.

3. Power dynamics within our research committee

Writing and responsibility

An inmate doing research is also a person trying to survive and to get out of prison. This dual reality is always present in the mind of the inmate researcher. As researchers and writers of the research, we are always looking for truths, or the closest that we perceive to be 'true'. With more than half of our team made up of inmate researchers, questions that were regularly brought to the table sounded like, 'Is it safe to say this? What kind of harmful consequences might flow from this either for ourselves personally, or the program or individuals about whom we are writing?' As a group we witnessed the tensions for inmate researchers between self-censoring and 'truth seeking'.

All researchers have to make decisions about what to put in or take out of the research. These decisions relate to protecting individuals, protecting communities, or protecting groups or programs within a particular community. In this sense, insider researchers in a prison are not alone in making choices – many of these issues have been raised by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) on indigenous researchers, and other feminists of colour including Aida Hurtado (1996), bell hooks (1984), and Beth Richie (1996), all working on questions of gender and sexuality subordination within racialised communities. However, operating among these choices for inmate researchers is a tendency for self-censorship that surfaces almost as a survival instinct. The consequences of writing something negative about prison can be dire. Worries justified by too many personal experiences include being removed from a program, being moved from one living unit to another far from friends, and increased pressure around any of the life-details of living in prison. Defining negative truths may create tension between inmate researchers and the women with whom they live and work. The realities of living in a closed community where everything and everyone is woven together, peer relationships are often a basis for survival. As an inmate researcher emphasised, 'there is no exit'. The self-censoring that results from protecting these relationships comes from the human instinct of self-protection in a prison context that maintains total control over one's day-to-day living conditions, day-to-day working environment and personal freedom.

Counter story within the production of counter narratives

Implicit in the theoretical underpinnings of PAR is the questioning of the traditional power relations between the researcher and the researched. However, as we have pointed out the realities and dynamics of the prison affect the quality of work and the participation of the inmate researchers in stated and unstated ways. An inmate researcher describes the constraint:

As prisoners, we are always bounded by roles and rules of a closed institution. Some argue that we are in prison to be punished; others would argue, to be corrected. But in any case, we are essentially objects who must be controlled. On the other hand, we are striving to take responsibility for our lives, to become active, responsible subjects. This conflict of roles and expectations plays itself out in our roles as researchers in this project.

As the research evolved over time, the nature of the constraints crystallised. Questions arose about the roles and responsibilities of inside and outside researchers. At points some inmate researchers felt cut off from the project. An inmate researcher explained these feelings as a series of plaguing questions: 'Was it just my imagination? Should I raise this in a meeting? Would I be seen as an interloper, a troublemaker? Am I stepping over the bounds? Whose bounds? Who has the power?' Some of these power issues were addressed by creating a process among all the researchers. Transcripts of focus group interviews were brought in, so that inmate researchers could read through them. This provoked a conversation about how to increase researcher access to the data without compromising the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. We discussed how Graduate Center researchers might include the inmate researchers' perspectives and spirits in conference presentations outside of the prison. These discussions went beyond seeking practical solutions, as we became aware of the dimensionality of time and space, shaping the contours of our collective efforts. Over time, as we worked collectively, particularly in the process of analysis and writing, we became a research team in which the distinctions between insiders and outsiders faded and other dimensions of our experiences emerged – women, mothers, graduate students, Spanish speaking, comfortable with writing, spiritually focused. Our team had a life and a spirit, which grew inside the prison walls and now all of us as a group had to figure out how to transcend those walls to communicate what we had learned together.

In our efforts to write against the dominant portrayals of prisoners and critically analyse the data, our 'in' and 'outmate' status worked both to open discussion and, ironically, at times to silence it. Often inmate researchers were the ones to caution against romanticising inmates or using highly politicised phrases like 'the prison industrial complex' fearing that we would alienate our audience.

Emotional work of producing a counter story – under surveillance and with care

The consequences of our work are many. We research and write to document the impact of college on women in prison; to support the continuing of a college program that is on what one inmate researcher described as, 'sandy footing'; to encourage other prisons and universities to consider similar collaborations and to illustrate the power of education in prison. On a personal level, we write to secure a program of which some of us are students, some are staff and some are board members. These intimate relationships bring both a passion and fever to the work, as the future of the program moves between solid and unstable ground. The emotions that flow around this tenuous nature of the program have an impact on our research effort as they demand time and space from us, often in our meetings together. In a research meeting it is common for us to flip flop between hope and despair, possibility and fear as we face the realities of our relationships to the college program, the research and to each other. These emotions and our commitments to reflexivity in our work at times leave us numb – the result of too many feelings. Sometimes in a research meeting we pause as a research member details the difficulty of registering new students eager to start the program with one or two courses, as she silently fears the program may close before these students graduate. Other times we deliberately stay clear of conversations that are too painful, keeping 'on task' as a way to feel control when there is little available. We wrestle with how to communicate these emotions in our writings, how to honour their influence, without getting derailed. The context and physical environment of our research is, by design, harsh, noisy and without privacy. We sit, after all, in a maximum-security prison where half of us are prisoners and all of us are human.

4. Counter stories and radical public policy

This last moment we share as an epilogue to the story of our research thus far. Two of the Graduate Center researchers presented our findings at State Legislative hearings on criminal justice reform in January, 2001. We entered the testimonial armed with both quantitative and qualitative data collected and analysed by researchers from the Graduate Center, Bedford Hills, and the New York State Department of Correctional Services. We awaited our turn confidant that our findings would appeal to a diverse range of constituency-based interests, from

tax dollars and prison management to national morals and responsibility. In short, we felt hopeful of our ability to wedge open a conversation between our research and public policy. Unfortunately, our hopes were quickly dashed:

MF & MT: Senator, we have social science evidence that demonstrates that college in prison reduces reincarceration rates significantly, transforms inmates, provides role models to their children, impresses even hostile correction officers as an effective intervention, reduces disciplinary problems within prison and is a tax-savings measure. Indeed, if you want to be tough on crime, educate an inmate!

Legislator: Doctor, your results are very interesting. But the truth is that my Republican colleagues do not want to educate inmates; they don't even want to help women on public assistance – the presumably 'good' poor, much less women convicted of murder!

MF & MT: Then can we assume that if they don't care about reincarceration rates, social engagement and community participation, or even tax cutting, that the point is to warehouse Black and Brown bodies in State facilities?

Legislator: Well, yes... in addition to the fact that in New York State, Downstate's crime is Upstate's economy. With all of the building of prisons in our state, the economy of the Northern part of New York State has been rebuilt on the backs of minor criminal behaviour in the City. That is what moves my colleagues.

And so, in the hallways of the State Legislature, we heard the ultimate counter story about democracy in late capitalist, racially polarised America, spoken by legislators themselves. The State has shown a deep disdain for its poorest citizens; as it seeks to privatise and rebuild a global economy on the backs of poor women and men of colour. Though the Left has long suspected this truth behind this sentiment, it was somehow still shocking to hear its articulation from the lips of a State legislator. The troubles of poverty and racism, writ large in the prison industrial complex, are not, indeed, a cognitive problem but a political solution.

Is it, therefore, irrelevant to produce critical social research? No, we still believe that would be the wrong conclusion. But it seems all too clear that critical social science – a critical social science of counter stories – can only move policy if attached to strategic moves of public education, outrage and organising.

The authors would like to thank the Leslie Glass Foundation for funding this research.

Notes

1. Pell Grants are non-competitive needs-based grants for higher education. The total percentage of the Pell Grants' annual budget spent on inmate higher education, in the last year of inmate eligibility was 1/10 of 1 per cent (US Department of Education, 1995).
2. We began the research with an archival analysis of the records of the college program since inception tracking rates of persistence, women drafted (moved to other facilities), drop out rates, racial and ethnic distribution, percent in pre-college and college courses. Simultaneously Graduate Center researchers taught a Research Methods course in the college program so that inmate students could learn or brush up on their research skills and participate as full members of the research team. From this course, students interviewed four to five women each on the impact of college. The interviews explored subthemes of the three overarching research questions, and were used to develop a set of questions that the research team used in focus groups with inmates, selected on the basis of the women's status in the program: drop outs; ABE/GED students; pre college students; first time college students; adolescent children of women in college; college leaders/mentors; and ESL students. We also conducted individual interviews with women who were in the College Bound Program, women post-release from prison, correctional administrators and officers; and surveyed and held focus groups with College Bound faculty. Two group discussions were held with presidents of Consortium universities and, lastly, a quantitative tracking of the 454 women who participated in the Mercy College Program, was commissioned of the New York State Department of Correctional Services in an effort to document the rates of reincarceration for women who participated in college but received no degree; women who participated and earned an associate's degree, and women who participated and earned a bachelor's degree.

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