

Mothering Through Barbed Wire and Literacy Barriers: The Role of Literacy in Incarcerated Motherhood

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INTRODUCTION

Prison literacy scholars have continually drawn attention to the dangers of prioritizing skill-based forms of literacy in education programs behind bars. Skill-based forms of literacy not only offer the false promise of upward mobility and social inclusion during reentry (Shelledy), but they also foster hyperindividualization (Kling), which leads incarcerated individuals to believe that their incarceration and other events in their lives are simply the outcome of their ability to make good or bad decisions. To confront the erasure of systemic oppression that heavily contributes to the incarceration of marginalized populations, prison literacy scholars prioritize pedagogies that confront the literacy myth and foster collaboration. In addition to teaching skills that can be applied to academic success or job placement, prison literacy pedagogies encourage incarcerated individuals to explore identities (theirs and others) (Hinshaw), create literacy events (Plemons), and circulate counternarratives (Curry and Jacobi). While these pedagogies are successful in critiquing power dynamics, literacies, identities, and public perceptions as they relate to confinement, my research with incarcerated mothers demonstrates a need to expand these pedagogies to include the interrogation of additional institutions like the ideology of motherhood. Drawing from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved study with incarcerated mothers, I illustrate how their literacy practices are influenced and constrained by the institution of motherhood as well as by their confinement.

To examine the relationships between literacy, confinement, and motherhood, I circulated questionnaires to mothers incarcerated at a Texas county jail. Mothers' responses to questions regarding their perceptions of motherhood indicated that their definitions of a mother are informed by the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays). Intensive mothering, which I say more about later, is a dominant mothering discourse that maintains mothers are best fit to serve as their children's primary caregivers, should prioritize their children over themselves, and should engage in expert-level skills to meet their child's every need (Hays). Additionally, mothers' responses to questions regarding their letter-writing practices and conversations with their children revealed that intensive mothering also informed their use of autonomous models of literacy. Brian Street states an autonomous model of literacy is "the view that literacy in itself has consequences irrespective of, or autonomous of, context"

(48). Autonomous models of literacy, like intensive mothering dictate that there is an objective and accurate way of doing things. Additionally, mothers' interest in education-based programming as a resource to support their mothering demonstrates that the value correctional facilities place on skill-based literacies reinforces this notion of "correctness." Mothers' questionnaire responses collectively conveyed that their understanding of motherhood drove them to apply autonomous models of literacy to fulfill their roles as mothers during confinement.

While mothers' strides towards correctness can be interpreted as an attempt to conform to normativity, using motherhood studies to drive my analysis of incarcerated mothers' questionnaire responses allows me to situate their literacy habits as a way reject exclusion. According to Deseriee Kennedy, incarcerated mothers are a population who are often characterized as unfit mothers even before incarceration due their gender, racial, cultural, and/or economic backgrounds. As such, them appropriating dominant discourses of motherhood and literacy to perform motherhood should be accepted as a form of agency. Therefore, I argue that incarcerated mothers' use of autonomous models of literacy to meet intensive mothering standards is an act of resistance. However, careful not to discount the harm autonomous models of literacy impose, I reference mothers' questionnaire responses to suggest pedagogical practices that can help marginalized populations navigate the institutions that shape the way they engage with personal relationships and help them more consciously choose the literacies they believe will best help them maintain these relationships. In doing so, I take up Alexandra Cavallaro's call for scholars to "make room for stories that show who the individual is in the world, stories that focus on *connectivity*" (11).

This article begins by tracing the connection between literacy and incarceration, after which I situate feminist mothering as a theoretical framework. I then go on to overview my study design and introduce participating mothers before presenting mothers' questionnaire responses and concluding with pedagogical recommendations.

LITERACY'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE US CARCERAL SYSTEM

Intricately intertwined with the US carceral system, literacy has been named both a contributor to incarceration rates and an intervention to recidivism. Prison literacy scholars commonly turn to Eric Darnell Pritchard to conceptualize the relationship between literacy and confinement, as their notion of literacy normativity helps explain why confined populations rely on literacy for support, although it has previously been weaponized against them (Cavallaro; Middleton). Pritchard defines literacy normativity as the "use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm" (31). He goes on to explain that "literacy normativity consists of the creation of discourses that marginalize, ostracize, and condemn people for their identities and other ways of being" (31). The correlation between low literacy levels and incarceration, then, is not because those with basic reading and writing skills are more inclined to commit crime, but because this population has been ostracized from systems of support. This marginalization causes individuals

with low literacy levels to be forced into circumstances where they engage in illegal activities to cope or survive.

Incarcerated mothers are among those who have been victimized by literacy normativity in multiple ways. In addition to being cut off from resources, mothers' lower literacy levels impede their ability to mother. Serving as their children's first educator has historically been a part of a mother's primary role (Crooks; Hays; Willson Toso), so when mothers are not able to contribute to or advance their children's literacy development, it is considered a failure on their part. Incarcerated mothers are also othered because their racial identities, economic backgrounds, and their incarceration exclude them from constructed definitions of a "good" mother. Dominant discourses of motherhood reserve "good" mothering for white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, married white women (Hays). Incarcerated mothers, in contrast, are largely single mothers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and/or are women of color (Kennedy). Dominant mothering discourses also maintain that mothers are best fit to serve as their children's primary caregiver, should prioritize their children over themselves, and should engage in expert-level skills to meet their children's every need (Hays). Imprisonment prevents mothers from meeting these expectations. Thus, literacy normativity renders incarcerated mothers deficient.

The perception of incarcerated mothers, and other incarcerated individuals, as deficient becomes a way to label them as "non-normative citizens" (Cavallaro 5). Invoking the language of citizenship to describe their goals, Cavallaro argues that prison programs promote the appeal of transforming offenders from "non-normative citizens" to "good citizens" (5). Like other prison literacy scholars, Cavallaro critiques prison education programs for teasing literacy as a means to a second chance without "considering the particular challenges incarcerated people face in actually achieving this vision of citizenship" (2). Maggie Shelledy's study with formerly incarcerated individuals confirms that the "cruel optimism" of prison education programs gives those confined false hope, as they are still denied civic and social inclusion post-release, despite their success with academic literacy on the inside. Rebecca Kling adds that prison education's "remedial" approach to teaching literacy fosters a hyperindividualization that erases the power structures that marginalize incarcerated individuals and places the responsibility of incarceration solely on the individual.

Cavallaro confirms that prison education programs encourage hyperindividualization by positioning incarceration as a series of "bad individual choices" and frames the decision to no longer make bad choices as another individual choice (11). Along with "an image of the kind of 'good citizen' they will create through educational opportunities," prison education programs promote the job preparation and transferable skills they offer to situate themselves as a necessary resource to prevent recidivism (Cavallaro 7). This framing foregrounds literacy and education as a way to transition oneself into an "acceptable" law abiding citizen who can contribute to society, a transition replicated in incarcerated individuals' narratives of transformation (Cavallaro 9). Seeing themselves represented in the media as "lowlifes, cruel, mentally deranged, stupid, comically inept" (Toso 22), incarcerated individuals feel pressure to produce certain forms of writing to counter these negative perceptions (Curry and Jacobi). Michelle Curry and Tobi Jacobi admit that even though programs like SpeakOut!, their writing workshop for incarcerated individuals, aim to "encourage creative

counternarratives, it is impossible to ignore the reinscription of power dynamics that sponsorship by institutions of corrections and higher education impose upon the form and content of the work produced" (9).

For instance, Erec Toso explains that to publish their counternarratives, incarcerated individuals must "present [their] experience in a way that most readers will find interesting or comprehensible," which requires working on "language, rhetorical strategies, syntax, form" (23). Literacy sponsors like prison education programs, publishers, and correctional facilities heavily influence how incarcerated individuals perceive themselves and how they write about their experiences. The way in which prison education positions literacy as an ideal that can be used to redeem oneself from the "civil death" of imprisonment explains why incarcerated mothers embrace autonomous models of literacy. "Conforming one's practices to an ideological frame," according to Andrea Olinger, can "provide a feeling of security" in that writers may see themselves "performing membership in particular communities" (19). Because literacy sponsors like correctional facilities and dominant discourses of motherhood associate autonomous models of literacy with correctness, as I expand on in later sections of this article, incarcerated mothers perceive autonomous literacies as the remedy to their "deviance." Although incarcerated mothers are using literacy to engage with their children, rather than a wider public audience, they still feel a similar pressure to say things "correctly" to avoid having their narrated transformation rejected by their loved ones.

To combat the hyperindividualization literacy imposes on incarcerated individuals, prison literacy scholars advocate for fostering collaboration within writing spaces located in correctional facilities (Kling; Curry and Jacobi; Hinshaw; Plemons). More specifically, Kling urges prison literacy educators to "encourag[e] the inmates to step outside the role of self-examining subjects in need of rehabilitation" (70). The anonymous writing exchange Wendy Hinshaw facilitated between a class of undergraduate English majors and a class of writers at a South Florida prison is one such example of a prison education course that moves beyond just using literacy as a tool for rehabilitation. This exchange prompted writers to collectively apply rhetorical listening to engage in dialogue, practice situating themselves within their partnership and identify "the different social, cultural, and institutional contexts from which we entered" (Hinshaw 56). In doing so, Hinshaw states, "the exchange worked to shift how—and whether—we identify ourselves within systems and conditions of criminal injustice" (56). Creating a space where incarcerated writers can converse with the public enables both parties to challenge their social views, which helps to shift their identities and their perception of other's identities.

Anna Plemons' Family Arts (FA) writing exchange similarly uses literacy to connect incarcerated writers with the outside world by teaching them lessons on writing principles and then providing supplies for participants to teach a loved one the lesson via correspondence. Like Hinshaw, Plemons frees incarcerated individuals from the constraints of literacy as rehabilitation, granting them agency in how they apply their acquired literacy skills. Even more significant is the program's focus on connecting incarcerated individuals with loved ones through literacy practices and events. Literacy events, according to William Muth's examination of fathers' participation in a week-long mural-making project with their children, offer an opportunity for families to have intimate, vulnerable

conversations where they can “coconstruct new texts about themselves and sometimes closed them down” (338). While the ways incarcerated mothers use literacy to connect with their children are underexplored in prison and family literacy scholarship, family literacy scholars have found that participating in literacy events with their children and developing their children’s literacy practices has positive impacts on mothers’ and their children’s literacy development (Al-Salmi and Smith; Kim and Deschambault; Saavedra and Preuss; Willson Toso).

Despite the benefits literacy may offer incarcerated individuals in respect to their identities, writing, and/or familial relationships, we, of course, have to be mindful of how we intervene in literacy learning. Literacy, as Logan Middleton describes it, is “a chameleonic tool,” in that it “can take on multiple meanings and values enacted by actors in carceral institutions” (4). On the one hand, literacy sponsors use literacy to regulate incarcerated individuals through policies, sanctions, and education (Middleton). On the other hand, incarcerated individuals use literacy to create counternarratives, build connections, and explore their identities. Prison literacy scholars recognize this critical tension among literacies and continue to interrogate both literacy violence and the positive power of literacy (Cavallaro). The rapidly growing number of women grappling with being a mother behind bars urges prison literacy scholars to explore the role literacy plays in performing motherhood during confinement. Additionally, like the immigrant and migrant families that family literacy scholarship (Al-Salmi and Smith; Kim and Deschambault; Simon) tends to focus on, incarcerated mothers are attempting to access literacy through multiple barriers, making it necessary for us to include them in conversations exploring how marginalized mothers use literacy to build connections with their children. Understanding incarcerated mothers’ literacy choices and needs will help us create prison literacy pedagogies that confront the way in which literacy regulates personal relationships and will offer strategies for using literacy to mend and maintain these personal relationships.

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MOTHERHOOD AS A SITE FOR AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

Applying a feminist maternal framework, I use motherhood studies to advance our understanding of the nature in which literacy constructs and is constructed by the material realities of institutions (Middleton). Kim and Deschambault remind us that literacy practices involve values, beliefs, and attitudes that we cannot see (45). Using a feminist maternal framework enables me to make visible the unseen contributors that contextualize incarcerated mothers’ literacy practices and events. Exploring the relationship between literacy and maternal incarceration offers an opportunity to interrogate

how literacy operates at the intersection of motherhood and confinement, two different types of institutions that both inflict literacy normativity to restrict and regulate individuals. Knowing that mothers and incarcerated individuals have (re)appropriated literacy to resist heteronormativity within these institutions separately, it is important to investigate how incarcerated mothers engage with literacy to navigate these institutions simultaneously. To that end, this article is driven by the following questions: Do the ways in which motherhood and confinement impose literacy normativity conflict with or reinforce each other? How are incarcerated mothers' literacy habits informed by these two institutions? How do their perceptions of literacy impact their identities as mothers?

To answer these questions, I draw from motherhood scholarship to establish a feminist maternal framework. Feminist mothering, according to Andrea O'Reilly, is a practice that counters patriarchal motherhood (4). For O'Reilly, feminist motherhood is a political site wherein mothers can affect social change through socialization of children and the world at large through political-social activism. In defining feminist mothering, O'Reilly is careful to highlight the distinction between feminist and empowered mothering. Like empowered mothering, feminist mothering "emphasiz[es] maternal authority and ascrib[es] agency to mothers and value to motherwork" (O'Reilly 7). Feminist mothering, however, involves "a larger awareness of, and challenge to, the gender (among other) inequities of patriarchal culture" (O'Reilly 8). Incarcerated mothers' choice to mother through the structural violence of gender, racial, and social inequality along with incarceration is an example of feminist mothering. Moreover, incarcerated mothers' reappropriation of literacy to help them maintain relationships with their children and counter narratives of neglect serves to resist dominant discourses of motherhood. Through a feminist maternal framework, I call attention to the unique ways institutions use literacy normativity to label incarcerated mothers deficient and identify forms of resistance and agency in their mothering discourse.

A feminist maternal framework is useful in understanding the literacy normativity to which incarcerated mothers are subjected. Literacy scholars working with mothers (Rivera and Lavan; Willson Toso) have previously taken up a feminist maternal framework to investigate how pursuing formal literacy instruction aids marginalized mothers in rejecting stigmas of being lazy, uneducated, and/or unfit that are fueled by discourses associated with their ethnic or economic backgrounds. Recognizing the barriers that interfere with families' access to and application of literacy, in addition to interpreting the ways parents use literacy to parent and connect with their children, are central aspects of family literacy scholarship (Al-Salmi and Smith; Alvarez; Simon). Following these scholars, I consider "multiple marginality," or the ways sociocultural circumstances lead incarcerated mothers to experience various forms of discrimination (Kennedy). In doing so, I make visible the "multiple, local, and contextual" literacies (Richey and Evans 4), that serve to regulate mothers by prescribing a "narrow set of idealized behaviors" (Crooks 103). In this way, I follow Cinthya M. Saavedra and Cara L. Preuss, questioning "the very epistemological and ontological underpinnings of literacy knowledge as a western construct that disciplines more often than liberates marginalized groups" (185–86).

RESEARCHING MOTHERHOOD FROM OUTSIDE THE BARBED WIRE

Like other prison literacy scholars (Berry; Cavallaro; Shelledy), I am interested in the ways incarcerated individuals apply literacy to navigating barriers during incarceration and creating pathways to transition into the next phases of their lives: post-incarceration. Because mothering has such a serious impact on this process, I find it necessary to prioritize incarcerated mothers in our conversations regarding literacy's relationships with confinement. To understand how incarcerated mothers are suppressed by and/or engage with literacy during confinement, I circulated questionnaires to mothers incarcerated in a county jail located in Texas. My initial goal was to conduct in-depth interviews with mothers in prison, as the lengthy sentences being served in prisons offer a stability that reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of individuals being released or transferred during the research process. Due to the delays created by a combination of university and prison bureaucracy, such as completing the IRB approval process for both institutions and waiting to be assigned a prison, I was not able to collect data in this way. Fortunately, I established rapport with jail personnel through a separate project who, after a year of working together, invited me to conduct research at their facility. Because this prior project was not relevant to the topics of literacy or motherhood and did not involve me working with incarcerated individuals, I choose not to take up space discussing it further.

It is, however, worth noting how my relationship with jail personnel impacted my study design and my positionality. In response to jail personnel denying my request to conduct interviews, I decided to collect feedback via questionnaires. One of the limitations of using a questionnaire is that it unintentionally excludes individuals who are not confident in their writing abilities. For instance, asking mothers to write about their mothering and writing practices when they struggle with literacy impedes their ability to fully express themselves. However, the main benefit of the questionnaire was that it allowed me to bypass facility constraints and gain access to mothers in jail. Additionally, the questionnaire documents how writing shows up in these mothers' mothering practices, while simultaneously capturing some of their literacy practices. My altered study design also limited my interaction with participants to introducing the study, dropping off study materials, and picking up study materials. Doing what correctional facilities are designed to do, the jail kept me—an outsider—separate from insiders.

While the barbed wire barrier did prevent me from building rapport with participants, the positive I choose to take away is that the study unfolded in a way that allowed mothers to report their thoughts on motherhood and literacy without intervention. Much of prison literacy scholarship stems from research conducted through prison education programs or in collaboration with students who have participated in such programs. Though prison literacy programs foster literacy learning in necessary ways, they do influence the ways incarcerated individuals perceive, learn, and apply literacy. Being kept separate from my participants, although not ideal, reduced my influence as a literacy sponsor. I'd be naïve not to assume that my title as a researcher alone did not in some

way affect how participants responded to questionnaire responses. But my absence did remove the potential for participants to seek out my opinion about their literacy or mothering practices. Put in another way, conducting research with mothers via questionnaires allowed me to center their existing thoughts, habits, and practices without influence or judgement.

My questionnaire design was informed by the notion that incarcerated mothers use letters to build bonds with their children and maintain contact during separation (Enos; Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow; Sparks, Stauss, and Grant). While this scholarship attests to the benefits of writing letters, as they are one of the more accessible forms of communication in terms of financial and geographical barriers, it is not yet clear how literacy impacts mothers' letter writing. Moreover, the influence literacy has on mothers' perceptions of motherhood, and vice versa, is still an underexplored topic in prison and family literacy scholarship. As such, the questionnaire asked mothers to define their understanding of a mother, discuss their written communication with their children, and share any concerns they may have about their writing when corresponding with their children. To encourage mothers to express how they feel as mothers, rather than how they've been made to feel, the questionnaire purposely does not ask about their convictions.

At the time questionnaires were circulated, there were twenty women residing in the facility. Eight of these twenty mothers completed and returned questionnaires. The eight mothers who participated in my study range in age from 19 to 45. Four of these mothers identified as Hispanic or Latinx, three as white, and one as Black. Most of the mothers had three biological children, with five children being the most and one child being the least. To get to know mothers, despite our limited interaction, I assigned them a pseudonym and asked them questions about themselves, such as where they are from, what are their favorite hobbies, what makes them a good mom, and what advice do they have for other incarcerated mothers. I also preserved the idiosyncrasies in their writing (spelling and capitalizations). Below is a brief bio for each mother.

Janevah is 26 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to dance, play soccer, and jet ski. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "Even at our toughest moments we stick as a family & have great respect & manners towards each other." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to "Stay positive, keep faith & put God first. Romans 12:12- When you hope, be joyful. When you suffer be patient. When you pray, be faithful."

Denise is 45 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to read, cook, and organize. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "My love." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, "One day all this will be over. You need patience Educate yourself."

Vanessa is 36 and has five children. She is from Tennessee and likes to swim, play pool, tennis and volleyball, and sing. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, "I give my cHildren Lots of Love I usually try to spoil tHem Everyonce in a wHile." Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, "I would Let tHem Know That EveN tHougH you are going To prison & you are a mom well you'll always be a mom to your kids No Matter wHat I would tell woman To Read tHeir bibles & kNow tHat god Has tHem always & That tHis to sHall Pass & Your cHildreN will always Love you No matter wHat."

Robin is 31 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes social media, working out, taking

pictures, listening to music, and dancing. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “No matter what I’m always there aNd Never give up.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “Do better IN life.”

Sarah is 19 and has one child. She is from Texas and likes working out, drawing, canoeing, dancing, playing video games, and “Jammin.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to, “Keep the faith. There is a reason for eeverything. Kids are gonna be kdis and just pour out your love to them and believe you will hold them some day Gotta keep your head up.”¹

Vicki is 38 and has two children. She is from Washington and likes social media, drawing, playing on the computer, and photography. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “When I do see my kids, we have plenty of fun, and they know I love them, but what really makes me a good mother is realizing when they would be better off with someone else.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “Don’t be overwhelmed, and stay positive, Stay strong.”

Keara is 36 and has three children. She is from Texas and likes to read. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “Being able to teach them love, respect, communication, how to do household things like eat, sit down, talk, how to help other people.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is to, “Advise them to have patience and be encouraged to move forward, espically asking God a lot. For him nothing is impossible.”

Lorissa is 41 and has one biological child and two stepchildren. She is from Missouri and likes riding motorcycles, reading, and walking. One of the things that makes her a good mom is, “That even though we are living in different states that I try to be in contact with them that I listen to my kids and let them Vent to me.” Her advice to other incarcerated mothers is, “To focus on themselves to change themselves because they need to understand its there actions that got them in here and there family wont be better until they get better. To find your (inlegible) spirt and love themseleves.”

While generalizations cannot be drawn from a sample this size, responses from these eight mothers still elicit counterstories (Martinez) to the publicly perpetuated belief that these mothers neglected their duties as mothers and their children are better off without them because of it. Providing a platform for counterstories is especially important in prison literacy scholarship as it helps to shift the field away from “discourses of transformation [that] can inadvertently result in saviorism, academic tourism, or outside people thinking that we’re [incarcerated individuals] in need of redemption” (Barrett, Mendoza, Middleton, Rubio, and Stromblad 18). Presenting incarcerated individuals experience of writing, Larry Barrett, Pablo Mendoza, Logan Middleton, Mario Rubio, and Thomas Stromblad argue, “validates lived and experiential knowledge” produced by people from underrepresented backgrounds and reveals “underrepresented ideas about prison literacies” (19). An underrepresented population within family and prison literacy scholarship, I contend that incarcerated mothers’ responses, albeit not substantial narratives, are valuable in that they too prompt new conversations within the field.

As stated in the previous section, my analysis of questionnaire responses are guided by a feminist maternal framework. Following Saavedra and Preuss’ advice to (re)read and (re)imagine “(m) Others” as having agency in order to empower rather than “(dis)empower,” I examine questionnaire responses across two different phases (187). In the first phase I looked for themes, definitions, and

sentiments that mimicked, repeated, or embraced the role of literacy propelled in the dominant mothering discourses. In the second phase, I considered the cross-cultural contexts these mothers were mothering in to identify possibilities of resistance to dominant mothering discourses. My reading of questionnaire responses reveals incarcerated mothers' literacy practices stem from their definitions of a mother, which are informed by an intensive mothering ideology that reinforces autonomous models of literacy. Considering their position as marginalized mothers who have been victimized by literacy normativity, I consider their attempts to appropriate dominant discourses of mothering and literacy to perform mothering as a form of resistance.

“[A MOTHER IS] A HERO SHE CAN FIX ANYTHING
AND MAKE THINGS BETTER”:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MOTHERING AND LITERACY

In this section I present the ways incarcerated mothers define a mother's role. I situate their definitions within dominant discourses of motherhood and then discuss the literacies these discourses are often connected with. Tracing the literacies linked to mothers' perceptions of motherhood helps to conceptualize their shared literacy practices, which I present in the following sections.

As Curry and Jacobi so eloquently state, “upon entering confinement, a jailed person becomes an ‘inmate’ . . . stripped of the many ‘selves’ we value as humans: self-express, self-esteem, self-worth” (5). For incarcerated mothers, one of the “selves” they are stripped of is their identity as mothers (Enos). Janet Garcia-Hallett explains that because incarceration separates mothers from their children, it is perceived as an indicator that a mother neglected her children, which contradicts traditional conceptions of motherhood. The first step to mothering behind bars, then, is for mothers to (re)construct their identities by realigning their individual characters and mothering practices with acceptable mothering discourses (Enos; Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow). Taking this initial step into consideration, I asked mothers to “Tell me what your definition of a mother is?”

Collectively, incarcerated mothers defined a mother as someone who is caring; nurturing; and provides her children with love and financial, emotional, and educational support. Some mothers clarified that a mother cares for, protects, and loves all of her children, including “biological and stepchildren.” Mothers used words such as, “protector,” “provider,” “Doctor,” and “Bestfriend” in their descriptions. In addition to stating a mother is responsible for taking care of her children's physical needs, five incarcerated mothers used terms such as “teacher” and “counselor” to express that a mother should also educate her children. Using one mother's response to sum up these descriptions, a mother is someone who is “a hero she can fix anything and makes things better,” and a mother should “help their children get ahead in all circumstances.” These definitions of a mother illustrate a belief that a “good” mother prioritizes their children over everything else. Mothers' responses also echo the traditional role of femininity in motherhood, which is furthermore reinforced by their descriptions of themselves.

In contrast to dominant discourses of motherhood that restrict women's identities to that of their role as mothers (Hays), feminist maternal scholarship aims to recognize the varying identities mothers possess, encouraging them to prioritize their interests in the same way they do for their children (O'Reilly). Following this guiding principle, I asked mothers to "Please list three words that best describe you?" While some mothers said "funny," "lively" or "Adventures," mothers collectively conveyed that they are trustworthy, caring, and nurturing. Most mothers used adjectives such as, "friendly," "very godly," "outgoing," and "generous"—or synonyms for these words—to describe themselves. The adjectives that mothers use reflect behaviors typically linked to femininity. Constructing an identity that aligns with societal norms relating to gender or citizenship, for instance, is common among incarcerated individuals, as they have been made to feel that exhibiting "appropriate" behaviors is a sign of rehabilitation. Because incarceration is contradictory to popular conceptions of motherhood (Garcia-Hallett), it makes sense that mothers would describe themselves with adjectives that allude to femininity and in turn affirm their identities as mothers. This is not to say that these self-descriptors are disingenuous, but rather to speculate that mothers are intentional in cohesively (re)constructing their identities as mothers. Sharon Hays explains that the mother employs purity, morality, self-sacrifice, strength, and the reproductive body, among other things. By describing themselves in a way that aligns with their views on motherhood, incarcerated mothers solidify their identities as mothers.

Consistent with other incarcerated mothers, the ways in which these mothers describe and define motherhood is reflective of the intensive mothering ideology (Granja, da Cunha, and Machado; Marlow). Drawing from intensive mothering to (re)construct their identities as mothers is common among incarcerated mothers, Lana Marlow explains, because they typically adapt their definitions from media representations of motherhood, which equate "good" mothering with intensive mothering. Intensive mothering, according to Hays, necessitates that mothers should sacrifice their own desires and entrench themselves in their identities as mothers because children should be cared for primarily by their mother and children should be treated as sacred (54). Under the principles of intensive mothering, mothers are expected to use expert-guided methods for child-rearing to deduce and attend to their children's emotional, physical, moral, and educational needs. While mothers' responses are indicative of all these expectations, for the purpose of this article, I focus on their desire to educate their children.

Mothering and literacy are intertwined in that dominant discourses of mothering, like intensive mothering, designate mothers as their child's primary educator (Crooks; Willson Toso). This designation alone is not necessarily restrictive, but the expectation for mothers to educate their children not only makes them responsible for their children's success, but for their children's failures, which is problematic. The link between "good" mothering and their children's educational success can pressure mothers into adapting skill-based literacies, which can be described as autonomous models of literacy. While adhering to some aspects of autonomous models of literacy can sometimes result in favorable outcomes, Blaire Willson Toso warns that skill-based literacy discourses are "free of context," meaning, "literacy acquisition is considered a cognitive function achieved through practice and motivation unaffected by social or structural differences" (Willson Toso 148). Like intensive

mothering, other autonomous models of literacy prioritize individual responsibility and ignore the social and cultural contexts that contribute to outcomes. In this way, literacy and mothering naturalize each other (Willson Toso).

A form of literacy normativity, intensive mothering enforces gender norms and regulates mothers' family decisions, reducing their autonomy. While Hays declares that intensive mothering is understood to be the "socially appropriate child rearing" ideology in the US, she is careful to emphasize that this dominant mothering ideology is not a choice made by women (9). Rather, she explains, "it is an indication of the power of men, whites, the upper classes, capitalists, and state leaders to impose a particular form of family life on those less powerful than themselves" (Hays 153). Mothers' definitions and descriptions of motherhood demonstrate that they have embraced a normative discourse of mothering previously used to marginalize them. Rather than viewing this understanding of motherhood as a concession to normativity, I situate these mothers' adaptations of intensive mothering as acts of agency, as reappropriating intensive mothering challenges the deficit discourses used to stigmatize them as unfit.

"MY SPELLING OR THE WAY I COME ACROSS TO THEM RUDE OR CAREING": PERFORMING INTENSIVE MOTHERING WITH AUTONOMOUS LITERACIES

In this section, I draw from mothers' letter-writing habits to demonstrate how incarcerated mothers use autonomous models of literacy to fulfill their definitions of a mother. In addition to focusing on mothers' descriptions of a mother as a teacher, I prioritize their references to schooling in conversations with their children, and their request for programming as a resource to improve their mothering practices. In doing so, I draw attention to how incarcerated mothers appropriate two normative discourses to navigate motherhood behind bars.

To gain a better understanding of the role literacy plays in mothering behind bars, I asked incarcerated mothers questions about the letters they write to their children. Five mothers said that they write letters to their children. When asked, "What are some of the things/topics you talk about in the letters you send to your child(ren)," mothers shared that they apologize for "breaking the law," ask about family and pets, talk to them about their health and emotions, and check in with them about how they are doing in school. Mothers' interest in their children's education reflected their belief that one of their roles as a mother is to teach their children. In response to the question, "What kinds of questions do you ask your child(ren) in your letters," mothers shared that when discussing their children's schooling they ask, "how's school" or "how are you doing in school." In addition to these general questions, mothers asked more pointed questions such as, "what tasks do you have," "what are you grades," and "are you behaving and stayiNg out of trouble?" Additionally, mothers said that they told their children they are smart, and one mother stated she used her letters to tell her children they "can accomplish anything in life."

Incarcerated mothers' focus on their children's schooling does align with the intensive mothering requirement to educate one's child; however, it is also a form of feminist mothering. Feminist mothering practices recognize inequities and develop practices to mother against and through them (O'Reilly). Existing research shows that marginalized mothers commonly use their role as their child's educator to guide their children to opportunities that were not accessible to them, helping them rise above the constraints of their social circumstances (Al-Salmi and Smith; Saavedra and Preuss; Simon; Willson Toso). As mothers who have been victimized by multiple normative discourses and have been cut off from society's resources, incarcerated mothers encouraging their children to pursue academic success is a way for them to counter stigmas characterizing them as incapable of raising productive children. Though I perceive incarcerated mothers' roles as teacher as a form of agency, it is important to note that the confidence they express when discussing their children's intellectual capability is distinctly different from the doubt they convey when talking about their own.

Incarcerated mothers participating in Leigh Sparks, Kimberly Strauss, and Kaitlin Grant's letter-writing workshop expressed concerns about communicating their feelings effectively. With this in mind, I asked mothers in my study, "What are you concerned about when you are writing letters to your children?" Mothers expressed concerns about spelling, tone, interpretation, and language barriers. For example, one mother said she contemplates whether to write in English or Spanish

“Rather than viewing this understanding of motherhood as a concession to normativity, I situate these mothers’ adaptations of intensive mothering as acts of agency, as reappropriating intensive mothering challenges the deficit discourses used to stigmatize them as unfit.”

because one of her children can “listen better [in Spanish], [but] not read in Spanish.” Another mother said she worried about “My spelling or the way I come across to them rude or caring,” and how her children would “Interpet [her] words.” Mothers’ apprehension about spelling attests to a perception of literacy as a standard, mechanist, and technical skill. This concept of correctness, according to Brian Street,

“dominates much formal thinking on language and literacy” (54). A part of what makes autonomous models of literacy dangerous is that they teach one set way of articulating oneself regardless of cultural, racial, economic, and gender differences. This limitation causes an obvious constraint for incarcerated mothers who are mothering at the intersection of multiple cultural, racial, economic, and gender differences.

Connecting back to mothers' definitions and descriptions of motherhood, their social and cultural differences may be a factor in why they seem to value skill-based literacies. Like autonomous models of literacy, intensive mothering not only fails to consider social and cultural differences but renders them a form of deviance. Furthermore, dominant mothering discourses convey a “[b]elief in literacy as order and cleanliness and ultimately good mothering” (Saavedrea & Preuss 188). The appearance of mothers' questionnaire responses can be interpreted as an example of this “order and

cleanliness.” When responding to some questions, such as “What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated” or “What are some of the things/topics you talk about with your child(ren),” many of the mothers listed their responses in columns. Restricted to a one-way discourse due to the study method, I cannot be certain why mothers listed some of their responses this way. However, it is worth noting that like motherhood scholars, prison literacy scholars have observed an association between tidiness and intelligence. Jacobi states, “prisoners often reveal a disconnect between an ingrained emphasis on neatness and handwriting-as-literacy and literacy as representative and reflective of their life experiences” (48).

This disconnect is especially complex for incarcerated mothers who are operating within the intersection of motherhood and incarceration, both of which use autonomous models of literacy to regulate them with ideas of correctness. The way in which the institutions of motherhood and confinement reinforce the same normative discourse is apparent in mothers’ choice of resources. When asked, “What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated,” half of the mothers said parenting classes, GED classes, and college courses. Ji Eun Kim and Ryan Deschambault’s work on mothering and autonomous models of literacy is helpful here in understanding the connection incarcerated mothers are making between mothering and educational programming. Referencing literacy scholar David Barton, Kim, and Deschambault state, “different institutions privilege different literacies, and in each institution, there is a dominant power that controls the use of literacy” (45). Incarcerated mothers’ perception of education-based programming as resources for mothering is in accordance with the value correctional facilities place on skill-based literacies. Similarly, to the way incarcerated individuals are encouraged to use programming to redeem themselves as citizens, programming is advertised as a tool to help mothers fulfill their roles as mothers (Sufrin).

Parenting classes, more directly than other programs, are offered as a necessary step for incarcerated parents, yet they can be potentially damaging to mothers. As I have argued elsewhere, these classes are a part of a power structure that correctional facilities use to surveil and regulate, or in the words of Marlow, “parent” incarcerated mothers. Carolyn Sufrin calls out parenting classes for not providing lessons on the “cultural stereotypes and policies that have vilified, in particular, black mothers who are over-represented in prisons and jails” (62). Rather than tackle the discourses that have disrupted parenting, and mothering specifically, parenting classes reinforce them, giving mothers the false hope that engaging in certain practices is what makes them “good” mothers. Similarly, the motivation to offer GED and college courses in correctional facilities heavily stems from the proven link between lower literacy levels and criminal activity. The assumed relationship between autonomous models of literacy and upward mobility not only dismisses other barriers contributing to recidivism, but it also effaces the types of literacies that incarcerated people engage in.

Just as it does with citizenship, literacy offers this “cruel optimism” (Shelley) that promises mothers they will become “better” parents, if they improve their literacy skills. Affirming the need to exhibit clarity, cleanliness, and correctness, education-based programming in correctional facilities reinforce the idea that good mothering requires mothers to adopt autonomous models of literacy.

Nonetheless, engaging in autonomous models of literacy to form and maintain relationships with their children allows mothers to pursue literacy learning opportunities for themselves, which may have been an inaccessible option prior to incarceration, and contribute to, or at the very least support, their children's literacy development.

“I LIKE TO WRITE ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES... I ALSO LIKE TO WRITE MY GOALS, AND PRAYERS”: COMPLICATING INTENSIVE MOTHERING WITH PERSONAL WRITING

In this section I present mothers' personal writing habits to illustrate how mothers use writing to maintain a sense of self. Recognizing that mothers' personal writing reflects redemptive notions of literacy, I demonstrate how this writing allows them to challenge normative mothering discourses.

While the normativity imposed by a combination of intensive mothering and autonomous literacies cause some mothers to have concerns about their ability to communicate with their children effectively through letters, these discourses do not disrupt their personal writing habits. When asked “what types of writing do you engage in?,” mothers shared a range of genres including journaling, recording scriptures, and/or composing goodbye letters to their drug addictions. In response to the question, “I have read that researchers say writing empowers women who are in prison, do you agree with this? Why or why not?” all mothers said they agreed and described writing as a safe space where they could express their feelings without judgment. One mother confessed, “it's easier to deal with my thoughts and emotions and even organized my ideas,” and another mother said, “Yes/ Because: You have more peace, patience, and above all better words because you see things in other manner, and value everything you have.” The ease of writing described here contrasts the hesitation mothers indicated when writing to their children. I attribute this difference to mothers situating personal writing as a private space in which the rules of autonomous literacy and intensive mothering do not apply.

When asked, “What do you like to write about,” mothers shared a range of topics, such as “daily life./ Feelings./ Thoughts./ Kids./ Family,” “experiences, especially funny stuff,” “prayers,” and “Bible verses.” Writing for themselves gives mothers a sense of liberation and progression. One of the mothers described writing as a way to take “[her] mind to a different state.” Another mother stated writing gave her “peace, patience, and above all...the ability to see things in another manner.” Another mother shared that she likes to write because, “You feel accomplished. Satisfied. ‘Done.’” Mothers' feelings towards writing and what they write about echo the “inward” looking comments women made in Jacobi's writing workshop hosted at a women's correctional facility. Data collected from Jacobi's workshop suggested that the women joined the workshop with the same intent they have when participating in any type of programming, to “focus on individual change and often personal redemption” (45). While my questionnaire did not ask mothers if they are enrolled in a writing workshop, and their responses do not indicate that they are, they situate writing “primarily as expression

and emotional release,” as do the women in Jacobi’s workshop.

While autonomous models of literacy may not be impacting the mechanics of mothers’ personal writing, the association between literacy and redemption is still present. The way mothers describe using their personal writing to critically reflect on and overcome their past decisions, create plans for the future, and improve or establish spirituality, religious, and romantic connections is reflective of a “focus on individual rehabilitation and reform” (Jacobi 45). Jacobi posits that writers can greatly benefit from using writing as an emotional release but adds that there is much to be gained from using writing to produce critiques about systems of power and “for reclaiming control and power over one’s life and future beyond the usual rhetoric of individual responsibility and rehabilitation” (45). In agreement with Jacobi and other prison literacy scholars, I do believe that we need to maintain a critical stance toward redemptive accounts of literacy. However, because incarcerated mothers are operating at the intersection of multiple normative discourses, I find it necessary to consider how their use of redemptive literacies might be allowing them to challenge other forms of normativity.

Although incarcerated mothers’ personal writing appears to take on a transformative role, this writing creates a space separate from motherhood. The intensive mothering ideology necessitates that women claim the role of mother as their sole identity (Hays). In their definitions and descriptions of a mother, mothers agreed that mothering is an all-encompassing role. Yet, their personal writing interests and habits demonstrate that these mothers have in fact established an identity outside that of mother. For example, one of the mothers who stated that she believes writing is empowering because it “brings out strong feels,” “never” writes letters to her child. This mother described a mother as someone who is “always around,” but she chooses not to establish a presence with her child via letters, even though she values writing. In choosing to write for herself and not her child, this mother dictates what “always” and “around” means to her, taking control of the way she embodies and practices her definition of mothering. Additionally, when asked, “Tell me about something you’ve written that you are especially proud of?” mothers described pieces of writing that related to their sense of self, rather than their identity as mothers. For instance, one mother said, “I wrote to my husband Bible scriptures. I’ve NEVER done that.” Two other mothers said that they were most proud of the “goodbye” letters they wrote to their drug addictions. And another mother wrote, “I once wrote a short story about an incident which I had lost control, and my teacher told me my descriptive language was so well written that it painted a vivid picture in her head.”

The enjoyment and gratitude mothers associate with personal writing demonstrates an awareness that writing serves different purposes. Their personal writing, despite reflecting individual accounts of rehabilitation, is a display of agency as they use it to pursue activities and identities outside of those associated with motherhood. By prioritizing themselves and their children, these mothers resist the notion of having to be either be child-centered or self-centered. Incarcerated mothers, at least by way of public narratives, have been positioned as deviant dangerous moms, which is why they tend to (re)construct their identities as mothers using intensive mothering expectations that position them as subservient to their children. While mothers in this study followed this trend, their personal writing habits show that they also maintain a sense of self: applying intensive mothering practices where they see fit, but not simply conforming to them.

“[E]VEN THOUGH YOU ARE GOING TO PRISON & YOU ARE A MOM WELL YOU’LL ALWAYS BE A MOM...”: PRISON LITERACIES FOR INCARCERATED MOTHERS

In the same way prison programs position literacy as the key to rehabilitation, intensive mothering creates an idealized version of motherhood that leads mothers to believe they will feel fulfilled and rewarded for their good mothering efforts. Taking heed of the way autonomous literacies and intensive mothering naturalize each other in mothers’ descriptions of motherhood, literacy concerns, and requests for education-based program to support their mothering practices, I conclude with pedagogical recommendations that combine family and prison literacy scholarship. Combining family literacy’s attention to marginalized mothers with prison literacy’s approach to teaching rhetorical strategies to appropriate literacy can create pedagogies that address mothers’ literacy needs without enforcing normalcy. While discussed here with the intent to support mothers who are policed and surveilled by multiple institutions as they negotiate literacy at the intersection of motherhood and incarceration, such pedagogies are also relevant to other marginalized folks who are victimized by institutions of oppression.

Anna Plemons’ Family Arts (FA) writing exchange is a potential model for elevating incarcerated mothers’ identities as mothers rather than regulating them. The FA writing exchange situates incarcerated individuals as literacy mentors by supplying them with classroom instruction, curricular materials, and postage to correspond with a loved one on the outside. The FA writing

exchange “consists of a twenty-four-part series of nonsequential lessons that address principles of writing practice and introduce students to writers whose work reflects those principles” (Plemons 90–91). The literacy mentors are then given the choice of sending these materials to their mentees or constructing their own. The FA writing

“Combining family literacy’s attention to marginalized mothers with prison literacy’s approach to teaching rhetorical strategies to appropriate literacy can create pedagogies that address mothers’ literacy needs without enforcing normalcy.”

exchange liberates incarcerated individuals from the constraints of literacy by applying writing principles associated with academic success to building family connections. Plemons’ curricular materials, which she personally shared with me, encourages incarcerated individuals to see themselves as writers by centering writers from a diverse range of backgrounds who they can identify with.

In its current state, Plemons’ FA writing exchange would benefit incarcerated mothers by teaching them writing principles that directly address mothers’ literacy concerns and offering opportunities for them to contribute to their children’s literacy development, which supports their desire to serve as their children’s educators. However, a revised version of the FA writing exchange that includes materials on both writing and motherhood would enable mothers to confront the relationship between mothering and literacy that is heavily influencing their approach to both.

For instance, an effective exercise might be prompting mothers to reflect critically on discourses of motherhood. Patrick Berry tasks his students with composing literacy narratives “in which the prison is reimagined as another space that affords them a greater sense of agency” (152). Reflecting on the outcomes of this exercise, Berry states, “rather than simply forgetting about the all-too-real material conditions in which they lived, students in my class began to reimagine literacy and, more broadly, education in prison” (152).

Prison literacy educators’ approaches to teaching students to have a more critical understanding of language, power, and the US carceral system should be extended to other institutions like motherhood. Asking incarcerated individuals to identify other (ideological) institutions they occupy and then to reimagine themselves as having agency in that space could help mothers recognize aspects of motherhood they had not yet considered. Additionally, questioning the institutions they occupy can help mothers reevaluate their identities as mothers, giving them more of a choice in how they want to perform that role and granting them the opportunity to identify how their cultural differences influence their mothering and literacy practices. Taking into consideration that incarcerated mothers view letters as a site where they can perform motherhood, lessons that offer rhetorical strategies for establishing a productive dialogue can help mothers and their children learn about themselves and each other.

When asked, “What do you want your child(ren) to take away from these letters?” mothers expressed wanting to convey their care and love. One mother stated she wanted her children to take away, “Knowledge, Comfort, love, Peace.” Another mother said she wants her children to understand, “I don’t forget them and I worry for them, I write them that I love them with all my heart, I miss them.” And another mother she wants her children to know, “mommma Still is here aNd loves them so much.” Letter-writing workshops help incarcerated mothers express their emotions to their children with the support of prompts and some instructional guidance (Sparks, Stauss, and Grant), but they lack an emphasis on important strategies like rhetorical listening. Hinshaw argues that rhetorical listening allows us to recognize “the ways in which culturally constructed boundaries of difference shape our speaking and listening practices, and also provides strategies for engaging in cross-boundary communication” (56). Rhetorical listening can help mothers conceptualize how the boundaries of mothering discourses and confinement, among others, inform the way they and their children communicate. Additionally, teaching mothers to write as a way to listen can support their letter-writing goals by preparing them to acknowledge their children’s emotional needs so that they are contributing to a dialogue and not creating a one-way discourse.

Exposing incarcerated mothers to pedagogies that prioritize interrogating institutional normativity, rather than enforcing it, would grant them more conscious agency in their mothering and literacy practices. Family literacy scholarship recognizes that mothers mothering within cross-cultural contexts are often constrained by multiple, and sometimes conflicting, mothering discourses (Saavedra and Preuss; Willson Toso). Rather than offer mothers options for how they can honor, reject, or combine these multiple discourses, programming tends to advocate for dominant mothering discourses. For instance, Stacey Crooks found that community literacy programs prioritize teaching mothers’ literacy skills that can help them as their children’s educators, rather than offering skills that

can be applied to mothers' own interests. Similarly, in prison and jail, parenting programs reinforce patriarchal norms and don't give mothers much choice in how they want to pursue motherhood (Haney). In contrast, prison literacy pedagogies teach incarcerated individuals to be critical of dominant discourses and the institutions that impose them (Berry; Hinshaw; Jacobi).

To continue advancing our understanding of incarcerated mothers' literacy needs, future research should more directly investigate mothers' literacy learning experiences before and during incarceration. Given the way my study design impacted my findings, I recommend researchers do this work via interviews so not to create more literacy barriers. Additionally, I find it necessary to also identify how mothers' cross-cultural identities impact the way they navigate the relationship between mothering and literacy. There were differences in how mothers across racial backgrounds applied literacy to their mothering practices, but due to the small sample size I chose not to draw conclusions from those differences here.

NOTES

¹This mother did not answer the question “Tell me all of the things that make you a good mother.”

APPENDIX

Note: The questionnaire below is reprinted in its entirety, but formatting and spacing have been changed.

MOTHERHOOD QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you so much for filling out this questionnaire. Your voice and your experience are valuable. It may seem like a long questionnaire, but that is because I tried to give plenty of space for you to write out your answers. If you run out of space, you can use one of the blank pieces of paper attached to the questionnaire. Please remember to write the question number next to your answer. I look forward to reading what you have to say.

Demographics

The following section asks you basic information about yourself.

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) Where are you from (State or Country)?
- 3) Which ethnic background do you identify with?
- 4) Please list some of your favorite hobbies? (they can be current or past hobbies)
- 5) Please list three words that best describe you.

Child(ren)

The following section asks you questions about how you currently communicate with your child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 6) How many children do you have?
- 7) How do you communicate with your child(ren)? (Letters, Phone Calls, Visits, Other)
- 8) How many of your children are you in contact with? (Some, A Few, All)
- 9) What do you believe are the advantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?
- 10) What do you believe are the disadvantages of communicating with your child(ren) using letters, phone calls, and/or visits?
- 11) If you use a different form of communication to contact each of your children, please explain which form of communication you use with each child.
- 12) If you have ever participated in video visitation while incarcerated, will you please share a bit about your
- 13) experience?

Letters

The following section asks you questions about what you say to your child(ren) in the letters you send to them. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be used to build relationships between mothers and their child(ren). If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 13) How often do you send your child(ren) letters? (once a month, a twice a month, once a week, etc.)
- 14) How long does it usually take your child(ren) to respond to you?
- 15) How long are the letters you send to your children? (1–2 pages, 2–3 pages, 3–4 pages, etc.)
- 16) If you ever send poems, pictures, or other things with your letters, please describe what you send and why you send them.
- 17) What are some of the things/topics you talk about in the letters you send to your child(ren)?
- 18) What kinds of questions do you ask your child(ren) in your letters?
- 19) What do you want your child(ren) to take away from these letters?
- 20) How does knowing your child(ren)'s caretaker, a CO, or the parole board may see your letter influence the way you write the letter?
- 21) What differences have you noticed in your writing since you've been writing letters to your child(ren)?
- 22) What differences have you noticed in your child(ren)'s writing?
- 23) What are you concerned about when you are writing these letters?

Writing

The following section asks you questions about the other types of writing you might engage in. The purpose of this section is to understand how writing can be a productive and liberating exercise. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 24) What other types of writing do you engage in? (poems, short stories, memoir, class assignments, etc.).
- 25) How often do you write? (every day, twice a week, a few times a month, etc.)
- 26) What do you like to write about?
- 27) Tell me about something you've written that you are especially proud of?
- 28) I have read that researchers say writing empowers women who are in prison, do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Mothering

The following section asks you questions about being a mother who is incarcerated. The purpose of this section is to understand how mothers fulfill their roles as mothers while behind bars. If any of the questions are too difficult, you do not have to answer them.

- 29) How long have you been mothering behind bars?
- 30) What do you feel is the most difficult part about mothering from behind bars?
- 31) Is there a particular prison policy or rule that constrains your ability to mother behind bars?
- 32) Tell me what your definition of a mother is?
- 33) How has the way you define mother changed since you've been incarcerated?
- 34) What resources do you believe should be given to mothers who are incarcerated?
- 35) What advice would you give to mothers entering prison?
- 36) Tell me all of things that make you a good mother?

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