

'I've stood at so many windows': Women in Prison, Performativity and Survival

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This article offers examples from working with women through a performance-based methodology that sought to understand how women survive the prison system. It proceeds with a reading of how prisons—characterized by citation from criminal records, sentences and files—are important locations for considering how time, memory, guilt or innocence, past, present and future perform. I am particularly interested in how these elements correlate with social gender expectations, and in line with literary and performance studies scholars Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick (1995), I consider a series of examples from fieldwork to exemplify how constructions of women's painful pasts become narratives to which they must testify repeatedly. The value of performance and performativity is as a means of investigating institutions and how women in prison present themselves, their histories and futures beyond the texts of sentences and policies. We are thus able to engage with how norms, desires and resistance provide different modes of performing futures. For women in prison, such futures are by necessity framed as rehabilitation and transformation.



Setting: Adult women's prison in England.

A young woman was telling me that an Enhanced Thinking Skills Programme was part of her sentence plan, along with a Drugs Awareness Course. She had been told she needed to undertake this training as a mandatory element of progressing through the system. Sentences in the UK reflect a tick-box culture; and when she finally managed to get access to the course,

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she felt that she knew exactly what they wanted to hear. She was able to mouth the 'script' that others from the course had told her. This script included penitence, shame, regret and promises of change. Her thinking skills were indeed enhanced, but her 'transformation' was a performance. I remember being unsurprised that she had resorted to such a script. After all, as she reflected, her honest opinions were just getting her into more trouble. (Walsh, 2012: Author's Fieldwork Journal, August)

This article focuses on the site of prison as constitutive of the performativity of women's narratives of their pasts along with the performance of prison. It is informed by my work as an artist and researcher in prisons in the UK and South Africa for over ten years. I make reference in particular to my practice-based project "Performing (for) Survival"—part of my PhD conducted at a women's prison near Stoke-on-Trent in the UK in 2012, which was conceived alongside Patrick Duggan and Lisa Peschel's edited collection *Performing (for) Survival: Theatre, Crisis, Extremity* (2016) of the same name. From this project, I sketch out an understanding of a performative spectrum that is ubiquitous in women's narratives, explored as a model that considers positions of 'victim-survivor-hero'. The article offers examples from working with women through a performance-based methodology that sought to understand how women survived the prison system. It proceeds with a reading of how prisons—characterized by citation from criminal records, sentences and files—are important locations for considering how time, memory, guilt or innocence, past, present and future perform. I am particularly interested in how these elements correlate with social gender expectations, and in line with literary and performance studies scholars Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick (1995), I have chosen to consider a series of examples from my fieldwork to exemplify how constructions of women's painful pasts become narratives to which they must testify repeatedly.

These testimonies are required in legal proceedings, and to gain legitimacy institutionally. Such legitimacy is both overt—in the sense of prisoners telling their stories while progressing through sentences; as well as covert—in the manner of stories constituting everyday groupings, dynamics and hierarchies that characterize institutional life. Thus, these testimonies operate in different ways as covert and gender-based hidden testimonies shared amongst the women outside of the predominant public narrative. Firstly as accounts for their crimes and secondly as narratives that explicate the convergences of victimization, crime and justice. They are performative in the sense that the testimonies of victimization, criminalization, and survival of the system become how they 'do time' (Haney 2010: 5). One can understand prisoners' attempts to perform scripts of rehabilitation in order to survive the system, but also to progress through the system. This is demonstrated to be performative in the reiteration or cyclical repetitions that produce an effect (rather than effecting transformation as others understand the concept), which I analyze in relation to Parker & Sedgwick's theory of performativity (1995:8).

The article is invested in considering how prison performs ‘corrections’ by requiring progression through processes of adhering to norms and conventions (Walsh, 2018: 2) and attending courses that aim to reduce reoffending. This, in turn, becomes the setting for prisoners’ performativity. In the context of prison, performativity is thus considered not as signaling ‘real’ transformation, but as a citational repetition (Caruth 1995: 90) of what transformation looks like so that women can progress through sentences and be released into society.

This article offers a detailed positioning of performativity in the context of women in prison in the UK. In order to develop such an argument, the article proceeds through three main sections. Firstly, I use Parker and Sedgwick’s work on performativity (1995) to define how the term is used in this project beyond the largely linguistic Austinian (1962) view. Secondly, I outline my work as an artist/researcher in women’s prisons, before considering prison life and its performances. Thereby I am particularly interested in developing an understanding of how women’s criminalization is so regularly caused by victimization and painful pasts which institutions in Western democratic contexts, despite all efforts, are nevertheless ill-equipped to manage.¹ The result is that many prisoners leave prison without having the capacity to cope with daily life outside prison walls, although many institutions set up requirements for rehabilitation as performative (Walsh, 2018: 2-4). By contrast to the UK context, South African corrections services reflect the socio-economic contexts still largely characterized by massive inequalities and poverty. Survival is not about the ability to reintegrate as a productive member of society but as a morally reformed character. Thus, rather than ‘corrections’, the focus on doing time produces a performativity that is predominantly about penitence and draws significantly on a Judeo-Christian conception of rehabilitation and reform, which is discussed by prison theatre scholar James Thompson (2004: 55-57).

Positioning Performativity within Performance Studies

In this section I seek to position performativity within the cogent disciplinary frame of performance studies using several major thinkers. Parker’s and Sedgwick’s collection of essays, *Performativity and Performance* (1995), signals a recuperation of performativity from the purely Austinian perspective, established in *How to do Things with Words* (1962). Their contribution offers the importance of performance beyond the citational analysis of identities, which they derive from Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler (1993: 2).

¹ I am making the distinction here between incarceration in ostensibly developed countries that are equipped with buildings, resources and state budgets to allocate to incarcerating people humanely and countries that do not have well-resourced systems of incarceration. In a different way, Lizzie Seal’s work on gender and representations of women who kill (2010: 1 - 17) points out that normative assumptions of gender roles mean it is easier to perpetuate thinking of women as victims than as perpetrators.

The volume shows that it is necessary to move beyond anti-theatrical prejudice (Barish 1985: 1) and consider the place of the iterative force of learned and adopted behaviors in addition to Austinian speech acts. There is a necessity, in other words, to avoid the moralistic positioning of what Austin termed 'parasitic' citational examples such as poetry, a stage production or soliloquy. Rather, performativity is a means of exploring how both language and gestures can 'do things' in everyday contexts and rituals. As such, in the argument, I am intent on moving beyond the examples of performative utterances and speech acts as formulated by Austin. In part, this sets up a core tension in locating the analysis in performance studies, beyond simply applying the language of performance to a context outside the theatre. Rather, there is the need to consider what, beyond speech, precisely serves as the force to 'do things' in prison.

Jill Dolan conceives of where these tensions may be productive. Dolan, an eminent theatre critic and scholar of theatre and performance, sets out some of the major issues relating to how performativity has been adopted beyond theatre:

Theories of the performative—in feminism, gay and lesbian studies, performance studies, and cultural studies—creatively borrow from concepts in theatre studies to make their claim for the constructed nature of subjectivity, suggesting that social subjects perform themselves in negotiation with the delimiting cultural conventions of the geography within which they move (Dolan 1993: 419).

This perspective sets up the interrelatedness between the individual subject, institutions and the changing formulations of space and society that co-construct one another. This article will consider how this manifests in women's prisons, though Dolan's thinking here is related to institutions of learning in particular. For Dolan, discussion of performativity requires a rootedness in theatre and performance in order to conceive not just of the broadness of everyday life as performance, as discussed by influential social theorists such as anthropologists Erving Goffman (1990 [1959], 1997), and Victor Turner (1982), sociologist Jeffery Alexander (2012) and latterly performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (2006). By shifting focus from performance metaphors, performativity allows a much richer analysis than a simplistic modelling of social worlds as stages and social actors as performing roles:

Progressing away from old, entrenched disciplinary thinking toward interdisciplinary thought isn't, in itself, a politically progressive move adequate to insure a radical inclusion of other content or methods. Leaving theatre architecture to study the world as a stage doesn't guarantee that all geographies will receive comparable attention. Schechner's promise of liberation through performance studies, and contemporary theory's promiscuous citation of the performative, will prove appropriative unless they're securely linked not just to new ways of seeing, but to new places and more identities (Dolan 1993: 429-430).

It is in relation to this provocation that performativity is positioned in this article: as a means of considering prison as a new site and prisoners as representing new identities beyond the normative modelling of social worlds as a stage.

Before that, however, it is worth teasing out some of the fundamental distinctions between performativity and performance as articulated by performance philosopher Teemu Paavolainen as well as Parker and Sedgwick. They hope to move discussions of performativity beyond considerations of the gaze and towards a sense of interpellation in which the space of reception involves ‘contradictions and discontinuities’ (Parker & Sedgwick 1995: 7). They propose that:

It is in this theoretical surround that the link between performativity and performance in the theatrical sense has become, at last, something more than a pun or an unexamined axiom: it emerges... as an active question (Parker & Sedgwick 1995: 7-8).

The notion of performativity as an active question that draws attention to the processes and practices that set up a forceful ‘doing’ in the world is what is valuable when thinking about institutions. More recently, the consideration of the theoretical value of theatricality and performativity is explained by Paavolainen:

the core distinction that their etymologies suggest between *seeing* and *doing* (from the Greek *theâsthai*, “to behold,” and the Old French *parformir*, “to do, carry out, finish, accomplish”) is casually extended to those of form and function, theory and practice, fixity and change: rigid semiosis as opposed to effective action, inner meaning versus outer effect, the *what* of representation and the *how* of reiteration (Paavolainen 2017: 174).

It becomes clear that performativity is not a clearly defined concept; and rather it needs to move beyond a metaphor as the ambitious argument by Paavolainen suggests. The distinction he puts forward between representation and reiteration is particularly valuable considering that institutions and big business claim efficacy on the basis of performance—as discussed by performance and media theorist Jon McKenzie (2001). Nonetheless, Paavolainen continues, performativity may yet offer a means of understanding processes of forming successful performances of reintegration into society that constitute rehabilitation.

In other idioms, the ‘prisonhouse’ of theatricality—as product, introversion, representation—gives in to a conceptual ‘breakout’ of *performance*—as process, extroversion, presence—yet soon the confines of *re*-representation are taken over by those of *re*-iteration. If ever there was a confining, pregiven identity that the subject wishes to escape, she can only perform that escape *per formam*—“through” a pregiven “form,” as the Latin etymology...suggests (Paavolainen 2017: 175).

Paavolainen’s thinking here sets the ground for my argument that prisons produce the pregiven form in which prisoners must present themselves. To signal these three concepts in relation to my own project: on the one

hand, prison theatre develops according to women's 're-presentation' (Paavolainen, 2017: 175) of their narratives. Paavolainen's articulation of 'escape' (2017: 175) according to a pre-given form is notable for prisoners, as to be rehabilitated is to comply with certain given outcomes of what 'successful' social subjects look like. For women, in particular, this requires a reiteration of gender norms, predicated on images of what female citizenship involves, including motherhood, caring roles, selflessness and non-violence (as I discuss in Walsh, 2018: 4-10). Thus, what I would hope to demonstrate is that it is not merely a case of theatrical reading of the social world of prisons, but the intent and force of prison sentences and programmed interventions that bring into being the 'corrections' of incarcerated people. In other words, the prison must 'produce' people who perform rehabilitation, or at the very least, are successfully able to have performed model 'prisonerhood'—in the form of largely 'docile bodies' offered by Foucault's theory of panopticism (1977). This notion was taken up from the architectures of surveillance that characterised historic prison buildings that overtly stages an all seeing authority in a central space such that prisoners are never sure whether they are being watched, which serves the disciplining function on their behaviour. Thompson's work on the 'stocks to the stage' (2004: 57-60) considers counter arguments to this in relation to prison theatre and practices in the USA.

When prisoners have satisfied the requirements of sentences, they are able to be released back into society. This article considers prisons and performativity by referring to long term employment and fieldwork in prisons as well as theatrical representations. It is not a matter of effectiveness, truthfulness or longevity that are considered when prisoners are to be released, as the crisis in recidivism in most democratic countries demonstrates, but rather how well prisoners can demonstrate their adherence to scripts of rehabilitation. Therefore, I propose performativity is productive precisely in the sense that it is offered by Parker and Sedgwick (1995: 8) in its cyclical repetition that produces an effect (rather than effecting transformation as others understand the concept). This is related to the Austinian claim for force that correlates with effectiveness. My view is related to Butler's thinking on performativity, which is, as Bolt (2016) states, iterative and citational. For Bolt, 'Butler is very clear that performativity involves repetition rather than singularity' (Bolt 2016: online). Butler's thoughts in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) position performativity as

not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition (Butler 1993: 12).

Yet, as Bolt points out, Butler is not intent on positioning performativity as *de facto* successful or efficacious, to use Richard Schechner's (2006) term from his theory of performance and everyday life.

While there might be "too perfect performances", "bad performances", "distorted performances", "excessive performances", "playful performanc-

es” and “inverted performances”, Butler, like Austin, argues that performativity is conventional and iterative (Bolt 2016: online).

Furthermore, John MacAloon states that cultural performances are ‘occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in other’ (MacAloon 1984: 1). The value, then of performance and performativity is as a means of investigating institutions and how women in prison present themselves, their histories and futures beyond the texts of sentences and policies. We are thus able to engage with how norms, desires and resistance provide different modes of performing futures. For women in prison, such futures are by necessity framed as rehabilitation and transformation. Nevertheless, what remains is the need to consider these critically.

The Performance of Prison: Performing Transformation

The core of my analysis relies on thinking about the institutional framing of women’s daily actions and how they are rendered performances in light of the processes, procedures and pathways of prison life. I consider how prison as performance is viewed in light of Marvin Carlson’s conception of performance as ‘a border, a margin, a site of negotiation’ (Carlson 2004: 20). Performance as a means of analysis allows us to explore the ways ‘hidden values, assumptions and beliefs’ (ibid: 27) are represented by the social actors and institution of women prisons. In other words, the prison itself is explored as a cultural construct that both conforms to and deviates from wider social narratives and scripts about transgression and the law. In turn, these scripts are viewed through a specifically gendered lens,² which predetermines appropriate subjectivities for women. It is within this gendered set of normative scripts, the stage of prison and women’s daily performances that performativity becomes a productive concept.

Art historian Hans Sternudd writes of how pain is ‘both communicable and molded through culture’ if considered along with the ‘possibility to escape pain’s alienating effect through empathic understanding: through *catharsis*’ (Sternudd 2014: viii). This perspective reinforces the need to consider culture broadly—as both formal cultural products (such as the production of a Clean Break Play I discuss further on), as well as the performance of everyday life in institutions as indicative of a prison culture. If, in turn, painful pasts can be communicated via formal and everyday aesthetics, then

² I make use of the term ‘gendered’ in relation to the conventions of feminist criminology that seeks to highlight the inevitable assumption of prison spaces as designed for male subjects, constituted and informed by masculinity. Thus, where I suggest a space is considered in a gendered way, I am not eliding the male gender, but rather, articulating that gender constructions, roles and performances should be clearly considered in relation to the ways punishment operates on the bodies of both prisoners and officers.

there is the possibility for healing. The kinds of aesthetics that can position inside and outside of predominant normative narratives require critical distancing or commentary so that we avoid replicating norms. To do so I use techniques such as commentaries or newspaper subtitles that explicate assumptions or complexities. These are developed from dialectical methods of Bertolt Brecht later expanded by theatre of the oppressed practitioner Augusto Boal (1979: 3-10).

The project relates to a period of fieldwork in a women's prison in the Midlands in the UK. The intention was to consult women as co-creators of performance material that related to their experiences of prison life and to tactics of survival of prison. The research approach developed out of over ten years of professional practice in prisons where I had developed a hypothesis about how prisoners are required to make use of performance skills in order to proceed through their sentences but also as a means of 'working through' their painful pasts — experiences that may have included 'offending' (which is the morally loaded term used instead of perpetrator or criminal) but that also inevitably included victimization. In the research, I aimed to consider how these performances might indicate some of the pressing criminological issues that relate to women: namely that as the system is largely constructed for the needs and benefits of male prisoners, and the specificities of women's concerns are not always attended to (Naffine 1996: 5; Chesney-Lind 1997: 30; Corston 2011: 2). Thus, when women's readiness to leave prison is adjudicated, there is little understanding of how institutionalization itself has affected women's abilities to adopt the language and forms of transformation that help people progress through the system.

The prologue extract from my fieldwork journal is an account of a woman whose sentence plan required various courses to be completed. This characterization of the woman who discovers that sentence progression correlates with a specific 'script' is not unique, and requires awareness of how her performance of transformation is contingent, partial and potentially exposing the system to security vulnerabilities. Partly such vulnerabilities relate to the institution's need to uphold security above all other considerations. This is where the understanding of performativity in the institution necessitates a correlative consideration of policies and interventions since, if prisoners are able to 'play' the system and perform successfully in order to progress towards release, then the effectiveness of interventions including assertiveness, drug and alcohol awareness and managing offending behaviors need to be re-considered.

In addition to performativity that 'successfully' operates to signal women's rehabilitation and prepare them for a life outside prison, performative resistance is another option that is about situating, temporalizing and opening up fissures for polyvalence. Institutional operations appear to be against this possibility, but women, through embodied and creative acts of resistance, find ways of working around the fixity of prison. These resistances are both 'positive' and generative, e.g. women swapping skills such as poetry writing and drawing skills, which may be acceptable to the institution. Yet,

they can also be destructive or 'negative', taking the form of destruction of property, or give rise to tensions accompanying sexual relationships and bullying. 'Positive' and 'negative' resistances would undoubtedly be understood differently by women and officers. In my experience as an observer of the everyday life of prison, I would argue that the distinctions between positive and negative resistances are not always stark. Embodied agency is ultimately an important goal that signals women's capacity to survive outside the institution. Yet, in the context of prison, the authority of the institution is called into question by acts of resistance; and furthermore, the negative result of destructive resistance is also that these provide justification to the institution to be more authoritarian. The unexpected, unscripted and unpredictable nature of women's resistances are improvisations that challenge the normative logic of the prison, and as such, form a valuable though ephemeral counter-narrative to the hegemonic performance of the prison itself.

Reflecting a concern offered by theatre scholar Caoimhe McAviney (2011: 60), it is perhaps unsettling to conceive that the assumptions of prison as a monolithic, stable and unambiguous institution that holds such totalizing power. Instead, prisons are characterized by arbitrariness, chaos and dead ends. The generalized nature of the systems of complaints and the unfair allocations of incentives and earned privilege were starkly evident in the women's prison. Arbitrariness in the operations of power, as performance theorist Baz Kershaw puts it, is what the panoptic system would prefer to keep hidden (1999: 138). In this project, through repeated visits and over three months of contact with the institution's staff, I was able to witness the lack of agency that such arbitrariness perpetuates for the women, who must, in preparedness, be willing to improvise in order to gain the results they need (e.g. gaining additional privileges, or accessing a particular course, or attending a specific workplace, or receiving access to legal advice). By this, I mean that improvisations are not always 'truthful' but rather conducted as a means to an end.

In the wider research (see Walsh, forthcoming), I explore the set of coded behaviors that make space for changes through improvisation. Since the site or field of the institution provides a fairly rigid set of scripts for behavior of both workers and inmates, we must acknowledge that the socio-political and economic context of the milieu impacts and changes these scripts. Prison's institutional function relates to the tutelage from one set of dispositions (criminal ones), through rehabilitative efforts, to the dispositions of 'functioning' members of society. These will be explored in more detail in a subsequent section. That such agendas are contentious is evident in critical criminology, particularly since 'rehabilitation' as an outcome is rarely interrogated, and measured only by the reduction of reoffending.³ Such agendas

³ Of course, there are other claims regarding the purposes of incarceration: I am highlighting the most hegemonic script that informs the Ministry of Justice's decision making, budget allocation and programming. While reducing reoffending seems to be the most prominent informing principle, it also subsumes other goals in the consideration of 'what works' (such as learning and developing personal and social

were particularly acute under the UK's conservative government led by David Cameron, and remain so under the subsequent government of Theresa May since 2015.⁴

Important reports commissioned by the Ministry of Justice on the status of women in prisons in the UK by Labour party member of parliament Jean Corston in 2007 and its follow-up in 2011, detail the issues and challenges of incarcerating women. Corston made several influential recommendations based on her findings, most notably, that there should be gender specific provision (2011).⁵ Her most recent report shows that "68 % of women are in prison for non-violent offences, compared with 47 % of men" (2011: 10); and the suggestion is that this indicates a need for different kinds of punishment. Furthermore, at the time of her report, 4208 women were in prison which made up "52 % of the self-harm incidents in prison despite constituting only 5 % of the total prison population" (ibid: 11). The disproportionate incidents of self-harm may indicate that firstly, the women that are incarcerated suffer disproportionately from poor mental health prior to custodial sentences; and secondly, that the processes of incarceration affect women's mental health more severely than their male counterparts. On the other hand, if we follow Sternudd (2014: viii) and read self-harm as a resistant performance of agency, rather than as an extension of vulnerability, then self-harm can be seen as a way of making space for personal transcendence of the limits of the body. Self-harm causes significant problems in prisons because the institution has a duty of care to prisoners, which requires staff to minimize the risk of all harms to prisoners' safety. This is also connected to the wider remit of providing protection to the public by ensuring that prisoners are not seen by the public to have agency to perpetrate damage of any kind while incarcerated. Whilst in custody, women's bodies are considered the property of the state, and thus self-harm in the context of prison must be understood in relation to pain, embodiment and the slipperiness between agency and victimhood.

A brief snapshot of a moment in between prison theatre workshops evokes the reflexive witnessing of narrative I faced meeting a woman in the corridor, elaborating these issue further.

skills, engaging with all sociocultural institutions as prescribed by legal statutes, behaving in 'new' ways, etc.) See also Walsh, 2018: 2 - 16.

⁴ Note that there is a small reversal in the number of women in prison in the UK in the year 2015-16, but the Prison Reform Trust (2015) maintains that sentence lengths are disproportionate for women.

⁵ Ngaire Naffine (1996) demonstrates that in criminology, males are usually the presumed subjects of research. Women are usually referred to as victims of crime, but she argues, it is rare for gender to form part of the investigation in research. Thus, where I use the term 'gendered' it is understood to refer to the female gender, in line with the field of feminist criminology (see Corston 2011: 2; Renzetti et al, 2013: 5; Seal, 2010: 11).

Testimonies of Self-harm

I was between sessions in a large women's prison in the Midlands, and waiting to go to the bathroom. This is one of the measures of control visitors are also subject to whilst working in prisons: there is no freedom of movement, so comfort breaks need to be scheduled. One of the women in our session found me lurking in the corridor, and approached me with her arms outstretched: she wanted me to see her scars caused by self-harm; to witness her suffering. She could see I was looking, listening. I was trapped in an ethical moment of performativity. Instead of remaining the outsider being viewed, I was now an important witness of an individual's 'abject' body. I can't recall what I said to her, or how I politely assured her that I had indeed heard her story. I know that I remained in the bathroom for some extra minutes to collect myself (Walsh, 2012: Author's Fieldwork Journal, April).

The extract from my fieldwork journal highlights witnessing as a key trope in the practice of conducting arts in prisons, and returns to traces of trauma theory (Caruth 1995; Duggan & Wallis 2011) in shaping the ways I, as a researcher, witness and respond to women's narratives of pain. In her contribution in this Special Issue, Nena Močnik refers to the performative ambiguity of the researcher/practitioner as witness. In the prison corridor, this woman shifted her performance when she realized I was actually listening to her; she became more animated, more assured. She knew how to 'perform' her scars for maximum effect. She had rehearsed a narrative that allowed her to shift between casting herself as a victim and demonstrating her survival. Self-harm is not necessarily an indication of suicide attempts, but rather, researchers say that it can be seen as a survival tactic for people, overwhelmingly women, who seek release from inner turmoil (as discussed by Kilby 2001: 125). Self-harm becomes a means of manifesting the pain and anguish that cannot otherwise be expressed. For professionals trying to deal with self-harm, this can seem as a performance that conforms to a limited script: the self-harmer is seen as a nuisance for drawing attention to herself and at the same time, pitied for the self-destruction she enacts upon her own skin. In this example, the woman's painful past inscribed on her skin becomes the testimony of her prior suffering. The self-harm is not only an action, but a citation, a performative repetition that repeats and remains on the surface of the skin. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey's (2001) provocative collection on feminist scholarship on skin provides an opportunity to consider the centrality of the body—skin in particular—and individual agency in relation to meaning making. This work offers an understanding of skin and self-harm as performative force, drawing on literary theorist Elaine Scarry's formulation of how bodies and their interfaces with worlds are made and unmade through social practices, the pain of which may shatter language and defy its representational potential (1985: 5; cited in Ahmed & Stacey 2001: 3).

Part of why self-harm in prison becomes so significant as a marker of meaning in the context of prison is the sense of visibility of the state vs individual and the duty to incarcerate people free from harm. While this usually refers to ensuring harm from others, it also correlates with the limits of women's agency to control their own bodies—when to eat, when to medicate, when to sleep—are all structured by the institution so that bodily functions are structured by the prison and its regimes. The notion of self-harm as resistance might seem romanticized but it does position self-harm as deliberate wounding that draws attention to how pain is perpetual, iterative and not merely an event in the past. Artist Tina Takemoto reflects on her own practices that have incorporated self-harm, citing Parveen Adams, who

reminds us that although a scar may be healed “it nevertheless opens you up continuously to the previous time of the open wound, a continuous re-opening of the wound” ... For Adams, the signification of the wound is unlike the cut that functions as an inscription or writing on the skin. Rather, the wound marks the boundary between life and death and acts as an unwriting of the skin that is not fixed (Adams 1998: 63 cited in Takemoto 2001: 112).

We might see self-harmers as belonging simultaneously to both the category of ‘victim’ of an original trauma and the (self-inflicted) pain, and ‘survivor’—which as a category necessitates repetition as its mode. In their compelling work on performance and trauma, performance scholars Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis offer a theorization on trauma, memory and the body. Their conception of repetition in particular develops thinking about trauma beyond mere narrative, and towards a performative, embodied experience. Such an understanding of trauma necessitates a sense of folding time, in which experiences fold and overlap and repeat past pains. Rather than existing on a chronological line, trauma re-presents pain:

Without recourse to settling in/on any one pole, the survivor-sufferer is perpetually caught in a violently schismatic circulation between them—creating a shudder of uncertainty in their understanding of the world and their place in it (Duggan and Wallis 2011: 5).

The performativity of trauma as outlined by Duggan and Wallis raises a range of modes for performance itself: including repetition, witnessing and issues of representing what Cathy Caruth calls the ‘unspeakable’ (1995). This loaded term provides important considerations for performance, which, in its liveness, insists on embodied narratives alongside text, which dismantles the silence or lacunae of difficult personal histories, burdened by violence, exclusion and marginality.

Troubling Categories: Victim—Survivor—Hero

The three categories of the Victim, the Survivor, and the Hero I will consider are animated in relation to one another as lenses through which performance and performativity are analyzed. It is clear that these are not catego-

ries that are foreclosed or fixed, but rather they interrelate. Rather than strictly operating as categories for others to identify with women, I propose this model for women's own understandings of their potential to transform or re-focus attention from repetitious narratives of victimization that appear to be inevitable and are tied to offending behavior. As several examples of testimonial and life writing with women in prison proffer (Levi & Waldman 2011), there is the need for women to rehearse alternatives, and to be able to perceive themselves as having agency beyond the limited offering of prison life. However, there is the need to inflect a complex and iterative relationship between the positions of the model 'Victim-Survivor-Hero' rather than to replicate moralistic assumptions that are often, as feminist criminologists demonstrate, about 'successful' performance of gender roles (Haney 2010: 30-35).

Feminist criminologist Meda Chesney-Lind explores the ways victimization of women criminals (called 'offenders' in the Anglo-American criminal justice system) is often related directly to their gender, e.g. through sexual abuse, incest and rape as well as enforced sex-work. In addition, these women often conform to societal gender role expectations relating to aspirations and relationships (prioritizing motherhood, domesticity and care over alternatives), with the result that 'the victimization related to their gender continues into their adult relationships with both pimps and customers' (Chesney-Lind 1997: 142). The gendered view of punishment and the concomitant roles legitimated by the criminal justice system has resulted in a limited spectrum of behaviors for women. This can be seen in a complex dynamic triad of 'Victim – Survivor – Hero', whereby women may be seen in one frame predominantly, but a change of lens, or discourse may move her towards another of these labels. One might legitimately want to explore the model of bystanders or onlookers in such a model. However, in this formulation, I am modelling women's positions rather than the attitudes or narratives from elsewhere.

Such a model is morally informed by the foreknowledge that women in prison have been tried and found guilty of crimes—a consideration that emerges as a theme or trope throughout research about those in prisons. Their guilt is not the focus of this article. The question for audience members and, more directly, for practitioners creating theatre with prisoners or about prisons, is how to escape moralizing, and indeed, whether that is necessary, or possible. The painful pasts of prisoners are not limited to themselves as perpetrators of crime, but often, and indeed almost always, in the case of women in prison, as also victims of crimes, as discussed above (cp. Corston 2011: 12; Haney 2010: 150-55; Renzetti et al, 2013: 1-6). This is also cogent because the model 'Victim—Survivor—Hero' animates how self-concept within the institution does not need to cement women's behaviors or predicate their future deeds. As such, the model offers a way of troubling categories in order to consider the issue of prison's performative potential – how women might attempt to rehearse conventions and norms of behavior for the future. Feminist criminologists (Haney 2010: 1-28; Naffine 1996: 38)

demonstrate that within the chaos of everyday lives (including intersecting issues of poverty, lack of educational attainment, addictions and little social mobility), they may have avoided such norms, or may have actively been excluded from them. This 'conventional' performativity, as identified by Butler (1993: 12), positions the ideal performance of women as capable of navigating multiple expectations without transgressing 'successful' performance of motherhood, for instance. In the case of women released from prison, the capacity to manage competing challenges and obstacles (including regaining custody of children who may have been taken into care), is a significant issue that affects rates of recidivism. The model provides an opportunity to consider the ways categories might form the conventions of behavior for 'ideal' women, and therefore remain limitations. The model, introduced below, problematizes the labels 'victim', 'survivor' and 'hero'.

The UN has raised the need for debating the meanings of 'victimhood', particularly since other societal inequalities such as race, ethnicity, poor mental health and poverty also intersect with the notion of victimhood. The UN recognizes that women's vulnerability in patriarchal society reinforces the sense of women as always already victims (Erez et al 2009: 34, 44). In their work from medical sociology, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009: 1-12) also warn of the dangers of not contesting the trope of 'victim'. It is all too easy to fall back on categories of inequality and oppression as 'proof' of victimization. For Fassin and Rechtman, the medicalization of trauma has contributed to the lack of critical openness about what constitutes a 'victim' (Fassin & Rechtman 2009: 30-35). For the women themselves, the category of 'victim', multiply applied, directs 'blame' away from themselves, as personal agency had been limited. This is evident in prison programming that prioritizes addiction awareness. While such programs help women understand the mechanisms of addiction, they also reinforce a lack of agency by encouraging a dependency narrative.⁶ Simone Weil-Davis reflects on the narratives of 'empowerment' that permeate prison programs as a double bind. She suggests

the unspoken imperative remains that the elicited agency must be limited to personal healing and recovery. Reflection on structural, institutional injustice [...] is dubbed whining, a shirking from the accountability that makes personal transformation possible (Weil-Davis 2011: 210).

Furthermore, there are critiques of the self-esteem discourse that has infiltrated criminal justice, particularly regarding women, arguing that political agency provides the context for subjective agency (Weil-Davis 2011: 214). By diminishing the agency women in prison hold in relation to their future pathways (employment, education, maintaining family relationships) and in relation to their bodies, women are disempowered. Yet, as development studies, psychology and humanitarian research has shown (Fassin & Rechtman 2009: 107), the disempowered often hold on to positions of victimhood when they become defining; particularly when they are related to accessing

⁶ This is explored in a US context by Haney (2010).

aid or other benefits which accompany philanthropic giving or welfare. Similarly, in this Issue, Nena Močnik's elaboration of work with survivors of sexual violence in the context of Bosnia indicates the ambiguity of victim status for the practitioner. In relation to arts in prisons, the benevolent guest artist 'giving' salve to the victimized participants has been an under-researched phenomenon.⁷ All too often, women's victimhood is firstly assumed, and secondly perpetuated in the delivery of programs in prisons.

The complex interrelationship between having survived violence, trauma and hardship and the predominance of moral victory that accompanies survival erases the difficulties and conflicts, perhaps also guilt and sense of loss, in 'surviving'. This might be due to a loss of stable identification.⁸ Such complexity is evident in the ways women and girls are characterized as protagonists in plays about prison – since 'survival' traces imply 'being done to', rather than implicit agency. Performing (for) survival serves to break open and disassemble the existing habitus by imposing urgency, pressure and limitations to the improvisational options available to the actors. In prisons (and other total institutions), as Goffman has outlined, prisoners' dispositions are purposefully erased in specified ways; and new features and behaviors that are important for their survival of the context of the institution come to replace them, albeit temporarily (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 100). We could see prisoners' tendency to mistrust everything and question their own beliefs as a performance of, and for, survival.

By including 'hero' as the final lens in the model, I acknowledge that such a view is controversial. I am explicitly attending to those prisoners who have been victims and survivors and who, as a result, have committed crimes. It is not in the interest of this article to defend those crimes, but to consider how the past experiences and ongoing pressures might interrelate to form chaotic conditions for women that lead to their criminalization. It is compelling to believe that people who overcome past violence and trauma are heroes. An example, used in several Clean Break Plays (which will be discussed in the next section) is the tentative heroism of women who escape years of domestic abuse by committing crimes. In these cases, women's crimes are directly the result of both prior victimization and the survival of systematic oppression. Yet, I must acknowledge that such narratives are also culturally informed; and that it is common for victims of sex trafficking not to report their victimization for a range of reasons not related to fear of being caught by police, but which concern sense of honor and family, for instance.

Furthermore, there is a strong moral and cultural code that exists within certain sectors of the prison population for women to represent themselves as 'strong'.⁹ When women that have been in prison for a while offer

⁷ I explore this in Walsh (forthcoming).

⁸ The work of Fassin and Rechtman (2007: 7 - 23) was very useful in thinking through the complex responses to surviving traumatic events.

⁹ This is one of the repetitive tropes in Chloë Moss' play. I explore the theme of 'strength' used in *This Wide Night* (Moss, 2008) more explicitly in Walsh (forthcoming).

narratives in performance workshops they appear to cast themselves as heroes: often acknowledging their crimes, and asserting their current position as morally superior to their prior selves. Often this occurs through testimonies of 'transformation'. This trope is repeated in narrative structures, and is powerfully illustrated in the case of serial killer Aileen Wournos, who was put to death in Florida for murdering seven men. She never claimed innocence, but became 'a born-again Christian' in prison and her transformation became an important part of her appeal against the death penalty (Hart 1994: 150). The transformation narrative is potentially performative when it serves to commute a sentence, or to speed up release. Beyond high profile cases such as Wournos', it is to the level of everyday performativity that I now turn, via an example of performance practice.

Performativity and Painful Pasts in *This Wide Night* by Chloë Moss

This section attends to performativity in Clean Break Theatre Company's touring production of *This Wide Night* (2008) by Chloë Moss that was staged in ten out of twelve women's prisons across the UK during 2008-2009. As part of the tour, my role was to facilitate performance workshops with women who first watched the play and then developed responses to the issues that were raised for them. My interest here is not to unpack the many themes in this play, which is one of the most significant of Clean Break Theatre Company's commissions in the last decade, having won the Susan Smith Blackburn playwriting prize and a Broadway transfer. Instead, this short introduction to the play provides context for an image and a narrative shared by a woman in a workshop after the performance. This moment from the workshop is productive for the exploration of painful pasts and performativity.

In brief, the play stages the 'homecoming' scenario of a middle aged woman, Lorraine, who has no real home to return to after her release from prison, and so she attempts making contact with her younger former cell-mate, Marie. The setting is limited to the studio flat that Marie has been allocated, and it serves as a replica of the kind of limiting structure of prison cells in that Lorraine and Marie seem confined to meting out time in the tiny flat, with the walls their only security and by contrast, every foray outside a potentially life-threatening event. In addition, the two characters provide a sense of prison's performance on the body. Time, for Lorraine, is marked out between mealtimes and medication time. She depends on the regularity of these markers in her day that constituted her daily prison life. Writing about the subsequent staging in the US, in which Lorraine was played by Edie Falco, the well-known actor from *The Sopranos*, Feminist critic Jill Dolan says:

Lorraine, whose awkward, jerking movements represent a woman desperately trying to embody what she thinks freedom means, hasn't a clue how to remake her life. Lorraine is so accustomed to the regimentation of

prison life that she gets hungry precisely at 5:30, when dinner was served inside (Dolan 2010).

While her body is still adumbrated by the presence of the prison, she is emotionally dependent on Marie—seemingly the only human contact Lorraine has had since leaving prison. Yet, despite being more world-wise, having been out of prison for a while, Marie is not clear from the pull of prison. Dolan characterizes them both as ‘among the forgotten, formerly institutionalized women for whom a world not bound by four confining walls is impenetrable, unreadable, and utterly uninhabitable’ (Dolan 2010).

While on tour with the production in the UK, we staged the show to audiences comprised of prisoners and staff, and then facilitated creative workshops that asked the female prisoners to develop their own wider understandings of triggers, motivations and consequences of the characters’ actions. In other words, the performance was used as the starting point for women to consider the performativity of release from prison—to try out how they might respond to the expectations, repetitions and scripts that are provoked by processes of release. In these workshops, the team noted the repetitiousness of women’s experiences of shifting along the spectrum of Victim-Survivor-Hero. We heard testimonies from their lives that mirrored those of the characters in the play, and that confirmed the sense of the many intersecting issues from their pasts that criminalize women.

‘I’ve Stood at so Many Windows’

Setting: East Sutton Park Open Prison, watching the play This Wide Night (Moss, 2008).

There were about 20 women one evening watching the play about 2 women who meet up again on the outside. It’s a complex story about the shift in relationships and expectations and how ‘the real world’ casts a different shadow on promises made in prison. One of the women participating revealed that the most significant scene in the play for her was watching the younger woman look out of the window, tracing raindrops running down the window. As she reflected on this scene, she re-enacted standing at the window, saying ‘I’ve stood at so many windows, watching the world’. (Walsh, 2012: Author’s Research Journal, September 2011).

This woman’s testimony offered a powerful reminder of how prison life positions women in singular frames—as offenders, walled off from the world. It also signals in a visual way, the sense of the bystander whose on-looking models a strange liminality of the witness to action. As the workshop proceeded, the women explored the impacts and effects of the kinds of pressures faced by criminalized women—how they struggle to reintegrate into daily life because of the repetitive force of prison, but also because of the wider stigma of incarceration and the complexities of family, housing, work and connections with the community that are broken by periods of incarceration. By enabling women to articulate the anxieties of release from prison and the inevitable hardships they would need to face while navigating these compet-

ing issues in daily life, the scene stages a performative reflexivity—an awareness of both the desire to be, and the impossibility of being, free—that is unusual within the context of prison.

Conclusion

This contribution has considered the value of performativity for understanding women in prison. Via Butler I have developed a conception of prison's performativity as reiteration, prescriptive of norms that nevertheless 'conceal or dissimulate' the institution's conventions and regimes (1993: 12). What I offer in the form of the model Victim-Survivor-Hero is a means of arguing whether, and how, women could articulate a range of positions and performances that allow for multiple interpellation. For those considering offense and offending from the perspective that the women in prison should be punished and held accountable for perpetrating crimes, such a view ostensibly places too much emphasis on women's agency. This is of course an important consideration when engaging with crime and its legacies of victimization. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the wider cultural understanding of women's crimes and criminalization in democratic Western countries as circumscribed by painful pasts, coercion, addiction and intersecting marginalities. Together, and in relation to carceral regimes, these lead to the range of requirements for women to perform to: images of ideal women that are sullied by criminality. Thus, as this article shows, women's performativity is suggestive of an impossible repetitive attempt to become acceptable rather than unruly. With a focus on performativity that is largely informed by Paavolainen, and Parker and Sedgwick, this article charts how everyday citational performance of transformed or rehabilitated self is riddled with fantasy and fabrication. As performance studies scholars Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach insist, in a way, 'theory gives theatre back again to the body politic,' since it allows performance and performativity to 'be articulated in terms of politics: representation, ideology, hegemony, resistance' (Reinelt & Roach 2007: 5).

The necessity for women to perform transformation, to testify to victimhood and to adopt narratives of heroism despite structural inequalities that remain intact signals the importance of a performative understanding of institutional life. If what is required is that institutions of correction produce bodies that—from an external perspective—are transformed, then those that are desperate to survive the institution will learn the scripts, behavioral and textual, that will help them to do so. The repetition of negative cycles of marginalization, victimization and offending, are the context in which we must understand women's attempts to perform their way out of prison. What I hope to have highlighted is that these performances are not efficacious, and are thus indicative of the lack of transformation on the wider social stages related to norms and conventions for women's behavior. Prison is thus exposed as fundamentally not about change, but as producing performatives in the sense of citational cyclical tropes of rehabilitation and reintegration.

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