CHAPTER 6.

LISTENING IN: LETTER WRITING AND RHETORICAL RESILIENCE BEHIND BARS

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This chapter centers on a study of prison letter-writing programs and advances a version of listening referred to as community-centered listening. The authors demonstrate the challenges in navigating relationships with incarcerated writers, the limitations of interpreting meaning in and from carceral spaces, and the importance of establishing listening relationships.

> Thank you for the books and I thank you even more for your personalized response. Out of the other five or six places that I write, this is the first time I've had someone take the time to make me feel like a real person and not some charity case.
>
> – LGBT Books to Prisoners letter archive

> Letters—more than any other form of literacy-related prison activity—are a prime indication that prisoners are inordinately successful in their endeavors, and not only display and use their literacy talents but use them in a way specifically designed to retain a sense of social identity in an institutional world (197).
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> – Anita Wilson, "'Absolutely Truly Brill to See from You': Visuality and Prisoners' Letters"

Though much of the world has moved on from physical letters in favor of faster, digital modes of communication, such letters remain a crucial lifeline between

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incarcerated people and the outside world. As the letter writer in the epigraph above attests, connections to outside communities—real and imagined—are life-sustaining for people experiencing incarceration. In fact, so prized are letters that when leaving prison, even as many people discard personal items they have accumulated, letters almost always go with them to the free world (Wilson 192). Mail provides an essential connection to the outside world despite the many limitations imposed upon how people in prison can receive and send correspondence (see "Writing to Someone in Prison"); as Janet Maybin argues in her study of death row penfriends, letters allow for the negotiation and reassessment of identity that stands in stark contrast to the "intentional dehumanization of the prison" (162). In this way, physical artifacts, including letters, postcards, pictures, etc., preserve the humanity of senders and recipients by preserving familial and community lifelines.

Limitations on how people in prison can communicate are part of the ever-present carceral control of literacy practices that determine who can read and write, what they can read and write, and with whom. Paid services like JPay have extended email access to some incarcerated people, thereby enabling them to access some forms of digital communication, and yet these same technologies also threaten to replace physical mail altogether, as the Federal Bureau of Prisons and increasing numbers of state prison systems move to digitize all prison mail. Such moves, made ostensibly in the name of security and convenience, threaten one of the few means of communication that people who are incarcerated have available to them, and overlook the particular kinds of physical and emotional closeness that the exchange of physical letters embodies. Letters allow writer and reader to imagine presence across place and space boundaries, a fundamental feature of epistolary discourse that Esther Milne refers to as a "dance between absence and presence" in which "writing a letter signals the absence of the recipient and, simultaneously, aims to bridge the gap between writer and recipient." While bridging gaps of time and place drives the purpose of any letter exchange, letters written from within carceral spaces make particularly apparent the boundaries that letter-writers must overcome, as well as the strategies writers employ to listen for and enact community. Such letters reveal the "active, layered, intentional" practices that we recognize as the core of community listening (Fishman and Rosenberg 1). In the discussion that follows, we build on methods of community listening to center the kinds of practices produced by and required for listening within carceral spaces. We carve out a specific space for community-centered listening to letter-writers behind bars to recognize the ways in which writers form community–however fragmented or partial–and enact practices of rhetorical and material resilience through listening.

This chapter offers readers windows into the complex system of discipline, punishment, and human interactions that the U.S. prison system makes visible

through letters written to, within, and from confined spaces; such letters embody a resilient and critical community listening that demonstrates resistance to state- and culturally-imposed identities and demand a community-centered solidarity. The letters come from several sources: the first is the archives of LGBT Books to Prisoners housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. For over ten years, this organization has been sending books to queer- and trans-identified incarcerated people across the United States. While incarcerated people can simply request books they are interested in, many letters go far beyond that, providing important insight into the lives of queer and trans people in prison and instantiating membership in global communities. Other letters also informed our understanding of rhetorical resilience in writers inside, including pairings of open letters written by trans people in prison and letters that respond to the specific cultural moment of incarceration at the beginning of a global pandemic. Writers and educators in programs we are directly involved with, as well as writers responding to the PEN Prison Writing and Justice Program annual writing contest, turned to letter writing to seek and maintain connections with communities of support. As Lori Lebow describes, "letter writing involves the writing self as a joint venture undertaken by the writer and reader. Writer and reader construct identity from textual cues based on the received responses from the selected audience" (75). In the context of letters from carceral spaces, we understand such "textual cues" as listening-centered practices that invite writer and reader to imagine presence across place and space boundaries and co-create relationships and understanding based on an interpretative negotiation of presence/absence. In line with other community writing scholars taking up the call to attend to listening as central to our work, we attend to the cultural logics as well as the available actions that shape our access and responses as listeners. While there is now an established field of scholarship devoted to reading incarcerated writers, including significant collections of letters (e.g., Castillo, Furio, Gramsci, Kennedy, Thompson), less attention has been given to the listening relationships formed through letters from prison. This site of writing is crucial to examine because the institutional constraints of prison result in communication that is often fragmented, interrupted, and subject to the whims of an institution whose core goals result in disconnection and isolation.

As prison literacy educators and researchers, we are accustomed to the restricted circumstances of carceral writing: we have each taught in conventional college classrooms and behind bars, have written alongside people serving time, and have participated in research focused on prison literacies. The community-centered listening we practice here is an effort to contribute to methods of rhetorical community listening that resist extractive relationships with historically marginalized people. We have learned that the rhetorical resilience

emerging from community-centered listening enables connection but cannot on its own enact it. For example, in "Writing to Listen," Wendy uses listening as a strategy to "tune to the material conditions of speaking and writing" in a writing exchange between prison and university classrooms (57). In this case, "writing to listen" provided a strategy for invention and connection for two groups of students to exchange writing and communicate across the physical, institutional, and geographic boundaries of a prison-university writing exchange, as well as a framework for thinking about the "absences that we are left to listen into" in such exchanges (58). But, as Romeo García points out, listening for such absences does not preclude the colonial memories that animate many rhetorical listening practices, particularly the "haunting legacies of seeing and hearing the 'other' in and on the academic scholar's terms" (García "Haunt(ed/ing) Genealogies" 240). For García, listening practices that presume the ability to stand outside of one's own position, such as Krista Ratcliffe's tactic of "eavesdropping," represent a "simulacrum of whiteness, a 'tactical,' but not ethical practice, akin to colonial gazing" (García "Creating" 13). Where Ratcliffe's tactic for listening from outside one's own identity position fails to attend to the limits in our ability to transcend or move across identity positions, García's approach to community listening tunes into the absences and "hauntings" in prison writing to "find solace both with the inability to extract and foreclose upon all knowledges and the inaccessibility for some of community listening" ("Creating" 7). Alexandra and co-author Karen Rowan address some of these absences in "Toward a Model for Preparatory Community Listening," in which they utilize community listening as a way of preparing to listen to historically and geographically-situated discourses to "make political and ethical assessments of these discourses' impact and our own responses to them in the work we undertake" (26). In this way, Rowan and Cavallaro adapt community listening as not only a means for engaging with the community but also a means for identifying "the (un)conscious presences, absences, unknowns" that shape listening relationships (Ratcliff 206, qtd. in Rowan and Cavallaro 26). Listening to letters pushes us to sharpen our attention to these unknowns, foregrounding the gaps in communication that so often characterize writings emerging from behind bars. Letters from inside prison can document experiences of incarceration and reframe them, but letters are also partial communications that contain within them the traces (hauntings) of sender, reader, and circumstances.

Our approach to community-centered listening helps us navigate our relationship with the incarcerated writers we read and the writing we help to amplify, as well as the limits of what we can know through this writing. What follows is a critical reading of letters from an LGBT Books to Prisoners letter archive, contemporary open letter exchanges between activists and people inside, and

letters written by participants and facilitators of established prison writing and education programs. These letters make visible the range of moves available to individual writers within circumstances of restriction and surveillance, as well as the flexibility of the epistolary genre itself. While the resulting partial listening remains a challenge when engaging texts from inside, we argue that ignoring these fragmented communications risks losing a rich source of insight about how identities and communities build and move between prison walls and the free world. We utilize community-centered listening as a means for identifying listening relationships within the letters we observe as well as navigating our relationships to these letters, particularly given the fact that we were not their original recipients, and so, therefore, must imagine our way into the listening relationships articulated within them. To practice ethical rhetorical engagement, we examine connections between epistolary literacy practices within the U.S. incarceration system and seek to make visible the ways that these letter exchanges and interactions deepen our approaches to active, community-centered listening. The featured letters underscore the need for social, affective—and often material—support for people experiencing mass incarceration, and challenge educators and researchers to think through the nuances of how and when people write toward social change. The emergent rhetorical and material resilience demonstrated in these and other letters encourages scholars to consider the collective and relational possibilities of extending the work of active community-centered listening through situationally-relevant genres like letter writing.

LETTER WRITING AS COMMUNITY-CENTERED LISTENING BEHIND BARS

In her study of letter exchanges between people incarcerated on death row and penpals on the outside, Janet Maybin demonstrates the key role that letters and letter-based relationships can often have in helping incarcerated people establish and maintain a range of social identities and relationships beyond those assigned by the prison. As one incarcerated person included in Maybin's study wrote about their penpal relationships, "I've found myself being an adviser, counsellor, marriage consultant, religious instructor, brother, friend, lover, editor, writer, poet" (159). For many incarcerated correspondents, letters provide a means for reforming or reimagining existing identities and relationships, as well as creating or imagining new identities and relationships. We cannot measure the "success" of such acts of resistance, or know anything about the specific experiences of the writers we look at besides the fragments they leave on the page. However, what we can see is how the writers make space—or listen for—community through the connections they make as well as the absences they leave on the page. More

broadly, in the context of prison, letters contribute to the construction of communities committed to both making visible lived experiences of incarceration, and to creating key connections that can temporarily breach walls traditionally meant to confirm colonizing power relationships.

Many writers to LGBT Books to Prisoners use their requests as an opportunity to seek out community and affirm their identity through their letters, and replace negative responses to identity (officers, fellow prisoners, family/friends outside) with validation of self-identification, mirrored emotions, and social interactions. The following two authors illustrate:

> Please tell us more about the types of books you want:
>
> I'm not really sure, just something that is similar to my current situation, not being out but feeling sexy about how I feel on the inside, confused but FAB!! (official form letter)
>
> I'm a bi-sexual prisoner in the hate filled California prison system . . . . There are only two of us LGBT prisoners on the building as far as I know and we are several cell's [sic] away so we don't get to help one-another much. So any help you can share with me, I'd be very grateful and would gladly pass on to him also.

The writers take seriously the invitation to engage with the LGBT Books to Prisoners process by choosing to locate themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community and as interested recipients of future books, materials, and correspondence. They model both an interest in listening and confirm a will to be seen/heard as part of a larger community.

As literacy artifacts composed within highly regulated environments and for specific purposes, letters often work to represent the conditions and challenges faced by incarcerated people in general, as well as the ways that literacy is accessed and circulated behind bars. As these two writers attest, both communication and books are highly valued as both escape and social capital, allowing, as Megan Sweeney has argued, those inside to "revision and rescript their lives" (3):

> Opportunity presents this occasion to one again reach out to you with best wishes in thought for everyone of you there being a blessing to those of us whom are reaching out for the aid you provide to the LGBT community of incarcerated people. It's been some time since my last communication to you and I am in need of some other reading materials to embrace a mental reprieve from the madness of prison life.

> Thank you for being there for all of us. You are the only Books to Prisoners supplier that will send gay novels. Which are loved by all of us! I pass them around to others that don't get many books from the outside. By the time all of us have read them the covers are falling off. I donate them to the library but they don't show up on the shelves. I don't know if it's staff or the inmate orderlies that stops them from being used.

Notes like these make visible the conditions of incarceration and extend the work of the LGBT Books to Prisoners beyond one-on-one correspondence and exchange, invoking a community that builds upon the initial gifting of books by validating the needs of people inside and allowing them to continue the act of circulation and community-building.

Others write to "LGBT family" or otherwise reference family or kinship in their opening lines, invoking the capacious understanding of family that characterizes relationships in the LGBTQ+ community. For example,

> Thank you for all you are doing for all the LGBT Familys [sic] in and out of prison. All the work you "all" do is truly amazing and a true blessing to us men and women behind these prison walls. "It makes us feel not so alone." Thank you and I hope you all have a safe, happy and fun Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We can see the multiple meanings that "family" serves in examples such as these, reinforcing kinship/allyship relations between incarcerated writers, the allies receiving their requests, and the community of LGBTQ+ readers and writers served by the organization. Applying a community-centered listening approach means listening to the ways in which the letter-writers form community with the organization and with other LGBT people through the kinship and relationships they invoke in their letters. Working with archives featuring writing from prison offers researchers windows into carceral contexts and creates a direct call for more active involvement in prison literacy work for those committed to a community listening centered on contexts of racism and repression.

Despite these moves to revise and rescript, the institutional specter of the prison remains a constant presence in letters, as writers demonstrate keen awareness of the institutional limitations on their literacy practices. One writer offers a solution to limited computer access by creating a semi-form letter to counter the material constraints he faces (e.g., "only eight (8) envelopes per month" and "valuable time that we are given on a word processor"). Moreover, he demonstrates a keen rhetorical awareness of the potential pitfalls of this choice: readers

may already be reluctant to respond to prisoners, particularly when communication comes through a form letter. "As a person incarcerated, many places do not like to respond to inquiries from inmates," he writes. "Therefore, please forgive me if this letter sounds like a form letter. It is easier to make one letter to send out than to draft several different letters." The writer names this and calls for human compassion and kindness, and notes the power of second chances. His ultimate request supports this philosophical stance: he asks for a wedding planner to help those inside marry and materials to tutor inside since the prison does not provide any.

Other writers are compelled (for many reasons) into action and use letters to name and update others on their advocacy efforts inside, offering accounts intended to parallel the outside activist work of LGBT Books to Prisoners. With each package of books that goes inside the facility, a short, personalized note accompanies the delivery. Letters reveal how writers often draw strength and motivation from correspondence with book senders who recognize their identification beyond a cisgender status quo behind bars:

> I have past [sic] the last books you have sent me to other struggle LGBTQ people and we are all grateful [sic] for all you do for us. It personally means the world to me that people like you all are more than willing to help our community and for that I thank you. I would also like to say thank you to Emma as well for the beautiful note that was wrote to me. I am here and your commitment has made me start a group to stand up for our rights. I have had it approved for my name change and also for transgenders to get there private shower. I would like to make a donation for the cause if you would let me know who to make the check out to. I believe hole [sic] heartedly that it is deserved.

While many writers mention and applaud personal correspondence with outside volunteers, others make visible the power exercised by the system when even a brief note halts delivery from a prison mailroom, interrupting relationships that depend on both institutional compliance and the ability to hear and be heard in ways that make malleable the institutional structures intended to box people, their stories, and their community connections in. As the writer below indicates, the ability of an institution to stall or even paralyze book delivery makes way for a new rhetorical challenge, one in which writers must both cede to regulations and convince a sender that it is worth trying again, that he (and all the other inmates at that institution) are worth the "inconvenience" of resending the books:

> "The only problem was there was a handwritten note, even though it was not a letter . . . . My Captain said that I should write to you and ask if you could resend the books without a note or letter in the package with the books. I apologize for the inconvenience. I also hope this does not hinder you sending books to me or other inmates. Again I would like to apologize to you for this inconvenience. I also want to thank you for your time."

As these texts illustrate, the letters received and sent from carceral contexts are rich examples of the complex power and communication dynamics that people writing to and from prisons face. They connect place and time through writing by constituting listening roles for writers and readers as both authors and audiences. Letter-writing moves readers and writers toward relational resilience as they listen to, learn from, and move toward self-identifications and affirmations beyond those inscribed upon them by carceral spaces and expectations. In such spaces, community-centered listening means listening for and with the communities invoked in the letters as well as the listening practices of the letter-writers. In other words, letter-writers are always already writing from and to communities; here, the letter embodies the process of rejecting a socially predetermined identity (e.g., criminal) by invoking alternative identities through the communication and anticipated (positive) reception. In the case of incarcerated people, who are in an institution focused on isolation, normativity, and individual responsibility, letter-writing is a particularly important means for maintaining identity and promoting connection. For scholars and activists outside, letters gathered in archives such as this invite a critical listening, a community-centered listening that calls for action toward social change, the need for which is concentrated in spaces like prisons where dominant narratives of identity often afford little space for diversity or equity.

When thinking about letter writing as an act of community listening, response is essential in building a deep sense of community that supports people through their time in prison by forming lifelines to the outside. Numerous letters describe the real impact notes from LGBT Books to Prisoners volunteers have, demonstrating how they also provide a sense of connection and community, inviting a strengthened rhetorical resilience as writers navigate the dehumanizing realities and capricious conditions of imprisonment:

> The thing that made the difference was a simple sheet of paper with three words . . . "You are important." It actually brought me to tears. It totally hit the spot . . . . Your choice of words was perfect for fixing a wounded soul.

Such individual responses are designed to counteract the dehumanization people experience in prisons as they are stripped of their identities and individuality. Many organizations that seek to reach in, as the above writer notes, do so out of a sense of charity, not solidarity (cf. Hubrig). The image of the wounded soul as a descriptor for the impact of prison on millions of U.S. citizens is pervasive and speaks to the impact of mass incarceration. The writer's words demonstrate response as an essential component of community listening through letters in carceral facilities to create connection and community that sustains people in these institutions that are not designed to be sustaining.

Response serves another important function in these facilities for queer and trans people: in addition to the creation of community and life-sustaining affirmation, letters can serve as an important means of protection. Across the United States, queer and trans people are subjected to particularly high levels of violence and mistreatment. The very presence of letters, according to Maya Shenwar, can alert the administration that the person receiving mail has a support network of advocates and allies outside of the prison. This is illustrated by the open letter, a form made visible by well-known public figures who have experienced incarceration, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Angela Davis. Designed to reach multiple recipients and be read by a wide public, the open letter is employed behind bars to fight conditions of isolation and provide support that transcends literal and metaphorical walls. It is also a way to confront the ever-present mediation of institutions, since open letters invite a wide and informed readership, pressing readers to face the material and affective conditions of U.S. incarceration that remain potentially less visible in transactional letter exchanges (e.g., book request letters). Open letters demand a public hearing, and invite public discomfort with the realities of incarceration as social issues requiring social investment rather than individual challenges that might be overcome through the delivery of books or other interventions focused on individuals rather than clarifying a larger social responsibility.

In an open letter printed in *Out Magazine* in 2013, Kate Bornstein writes to Chelsea Manning during her incarceration at the Leavenworth Federal Prison. A note at the top of this piece acknowledges several of the conditions that Manning faces: this letter will have to be mailed to her since she has no internet access, and it will have to arrive under Manning's dead name. This note highlights the material impact of institutional mediation, communicating to wider audiences not only a refusal to allow Manning her preferred name, but also making visible the treatment she endures at the prison: she is a woman incarcerated in a men's facility, she has been placed in extreme solitary confinement for long periods of time, and she lacks access to hormones, to name just a few. The bulk of the letter, however, offers Manning support, community, and

affirmation. Similar to letters received by the LGBT Books to Prisoners program, she invokes the language of family, an important metaphor in the queer community, to tell Manning that she is not alone: "There are already folks out here who proudly call themselves your sisters, and brothers. You've got uncles, and you've got aunties, like me." And, like any auntie entrusted with the care of a niece in a bad position, Bornstein entreats Manning to stay alive and make herself as safe as possible. Beyond that, Bornstein asks Manning to embrace her in-between state as a survival strategy behind prison walls. She says, "Experience as much ecstasy as you can, with the girl/boy body you've got right now. You are occupying an in-between stage of transition, and most cultures consider that place pretty darned magical and powerful." She acknowledges the limitations of her situation and brings in this advice to help Manning survive and, as far as possible, thrive. This letter is a lifeline that connects Manning to the outside world, to a wider community of support and listening. It also has a dual audience in mind: the addressee specifically, of course, but also a wider readership. Writing and publicizing this genre of letter writing in prisons functions as a way to engage a wider public in prison issues, as much as a lifeline to a specific incarcerated individual.

When Chelsea Manning was preparing to leave prison, she published an open letter in *The Guardian* addressed to her fellow incarcerated people she left behind. Like many open letters, she emphasizes connection beyond the barriers that separate them: "I know that we are now physically separated," she writes, "but we will never be apart and we are not alone." She also addresses the community that she and others created while incarcerated, and all that she learned from them: "The most important thing that you taught me was how to write and how to speak in my own voice. I used to only know how to write memos. Now, I write like a human being, with dreams, desires and connections. I could not have done it without you . . . . And to anyone who finds themselves feeling alone behind bars, know that there is a network of us who are thinking of you. You will never be forgotten." Both open letters address the specific difficulties that trans women experience in prison. Trans people are subjected to higher rates of incarceration and violence once behind bars. Letters—in this case, open letters—seek to call attention to these conditions and offer a lifeline to keep incarcerated people afloat, working, as Marion Vannier argues, to "illuminate the continuities and discontinuities of penal power over time" (252). Response to letters fulfills an important material purpose in sustaining the literal community-centered listening that activates writers and their familial and community networks, as well as the communities formed through the partial listening (always institutionally-mediated) of readers who may have the ability to pursue material and systemic change.

ACTIVATING ETHICAL COMMUNITY-CENTERED LETTER/LISTENING AS PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Ethical community listening in carceral facilities (one that keeps the idea of risk and vulnerability central to the communications) is vital to understanding how literacy practices like letter writing might play a role in disrupting a carceral system weighted down heavily by centuries of abuse, racism, and inequity. Our reading of these archived documents, as well as our own interactions with writers inside during the COVID-19 pandemic, heightens our awareness of the need for a community-centered listening that accounts for the particular material conditions inside carceral facilities. Like so many other social inequalities, the pandemic brought the importance and precariousness of letter-writing for incarcerated people into new light. As programming and visitations in jails and prisons were put on hold across the country, letters became one of the only ways for incarcerated people to communicate with friends and family on the outside and thus became a way to enact listening through letter-writing practices. Early in the pandemic, ProPublica published excerpts from letters written by people incarcerated in the Harris County Jail in Houston to tell the story of COVID-19's spread in the facility (MacDougall). In response to loss of access to recording equipment, etc., the podcast *Uncuffed*, which is produced by people behind bars in California prisons, pivoted to recording letters from friends and family on the outside, who read the letters they wrote to their loved ones stuck on the inside of California prisons during the pandemic. Critical Resistance Portland, a branch of the well-known Critical Resistance abolitionist organization, launched a letter-writing campaign aimed at encouraging the wider public to "write a letter to all 14,000 people caged in Oregon's state prisons" as part of a coordinated effort to bring awareness to the impact of COVID on incarcerated people. These direct actions tug wide-ranging publics toward the silences they may not have previously heard; writing letters to incarcerated people in state prisons makes space for listening in to both the wider complexities of mass incarceration and toward the stories and circumstances of individuals, hauntings, and audiences invoked.

Such efforts were mirrored by the programs we are involved with when the facilities we worked with closed their doors to outsiders as the virus spread. Alexandra's prison courses were temporarily suspended before pivoting online, reducing incarcerated students to a single Zoom screen. The SpeakOut! literacy program that Tobi directs in northern Colorado worked to recognize the pragmatic and affective disruptions experienced by both inside writers and facilitators when writing workshops were abruptly truncated and communication nearly silenced. The program tried to pivot by sending collaborative letters of

support inside—and publishing them in the spring journal alongside participants' work to maintain the affective connections that these programs embrace:

> We can now understand your apprehension about the suspension of the SpeakOut! Writing workshop due to the outbreak of the corona virus. But, let me assure you that we are working hard to continue with our writing workshop remotely and to have your work published. What matters to us is to support you write and make your voice heard. Even though we will not meet in person, we will be able to feel your hope and happiness that usually radiate at the writing workshop in your responses to the prompts that we will send. Don't let this situation quench your passion for SpeakOut! writing - keep writing, keep your voice being heard! I hope it will be refreshing for you to know that we are still receiving writings for publication, especially writings on color, light and darkness. (129-130) Jail Volunteer, *SpeakOut! Journal*, Spring 2020

> I miss you all so much and hope you and all of your loved ones are doing well in these unprecedented times. I know that we are all feeling so many different emotions; shock, grief, fear, anger, uncertainty, uneasiness. I hope that you have used writing as an outlet during these past few weeks. I wanted to let you know that you have all been on our minds and we have not forgotten about you! We have been in close communication and are brainstorming new ways to keep our community strong. I know that there are days we don't always feel up to writing, but I feel that for many of us, the urge to write has grown (considering much of our time has opened up), and let's be honest—writing keeps us sane. (131) Community Corrections volunteer, *SpeakOut! Journal*, Spring 2020

These sample letters from SpeakOut! facilitators express concern for incarcerated people by offering statements of support that recognize and articulate the particularly difficult times that writers would be facing behind bars and encouragement for continuing to use writing to deal with the difficulties in the months ahead. Here the facilitators write into the unknown—not knowing what the pandemic would bring for them—and affirm community through their shared knowledge of prison writing. The physical absences we would all soon experience became emblematic of the larger, historically entrenched fragmentation that writers working within carceral spaces experience, always partial, always fragmented.

This one program's attempt to adapt was shared and replicated elsewhere as writers worked to share stories of pandemic survival and loss from inside. Such projects call on audiences to listen to experiences of the pandemic as it unfolded inside prison, as well as to understand the experience of watching a pandemic take hold from within prison. The 2020 Prison Writing Awards anthology published annually by PEN America included a thirty-two-page collection of "pandemic letters" from award winners; the eighteen letters document the heightened restrictions and isolations experienced by people in prison, including a sense of helplessness to participate in the global response, as writer Nick Browning attests: "The real world has come to resemble the incarcerated one in ways I wouldn't have thought likely" (288). Another collection, *Hear Us*: *Writing from the Inside During the Time of Covid,* created by Exchange for Change and Disorder Press, opens with an image of a submission letter from Bob R. Williams Jr., whose essay "In Memoriam: 2020's Covid-19 Losses to the Death Row Community," describes how San Quentin has "become a sort of home" for him, and how "COVID-19 came into my home and left with a few of my friends and associates" (64). For Williams and others, letters, poems, and other written and visual forms provide a way to write their experiences into our memories of the pandemic, creating a record of listening that counters narratives that privilege dominant discourse and risk erasing the experiences of people in prison.

For many incarcerated writers, the pandemic has also provided a new way of communicating the systemic injustice and broken conditions that have long characterized the prison system. Eduardo Martinez argues that society views "inmates as viruses" and describes the common COVID-19 symptom of losing smell and taste as "not a bad thing if you've ever eaten prison food or have been confined and clustered with over 82 men in a Florida prison dormitory with no A.C. or proper ventilation" (18). Many writers in the collection also reference the murder of George Floyd, both as a means of showing solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives and the protests against police violence held around the world in 2020, and to reinforce the systemic connections between police violence and mass incarceration. Israel (Izzy) Martinez takes up the language of COVID-19 as well as the Movement for Black Lives and the murder of George Floyd in his declaration that "I haven't breathed properly in almost a decade" (111).

While we hope the conditions created by COVID-19 are temporary, the responses to those conditions demonstrate the powerful potential of letter writing behind bars as a means of enacting deep listening practices within confining institutions and beyond as letters circulate into communities physically outside of the prison walls.

TOWARD LETTER WRITING AS RHETORICALLY RESILIENT COMMUNITY-CENTERED LISTENING

> [R]esilience is not a state of being but a process of rhetorically engaging with material circumstances and situational exigences . . . . Resilience does not necessarily return an individual life to equilibrium but entails an ongoing responsiveness, never complete nor predetermined.
>
> – Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady, *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience*, p. 7

Although many of us have spent significant time thinking through the implications of isolation and resilience (or lack thereof) of our physical, social, and mental systems of support in recent years, incarcerated people have long experienced a more deeply entrenched pandemic, one that perpetuates racial bias, violence against non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people, class discrimination, and withholding educational resources. The letters we listen to in this essay exemplify these inequities and suggest ways that scholar educators committed to community-centered listening might participate in active social change efforts behind bars. Elizabeth Hawes' letter, featured in the 2020 PEN America award winners essay collection, exemplifies the kind of rhetorical resilience that can emerge and sustain writers inside:

> Hey COVID—
>
> You've been reaching out to prisoners, so I'm dropping you a line.
>
> I'll be the first to admit I've cried over someone or something every day since mid-March. Your march of destruction, along with the mark for global justice, have made for a rainy spring. But with sorrow comes new ways of viewing the world, an opening to new possibilities, potential & reform. This is a year of expression & turn around.
>
> It's true you have worn us down, but here's the higher truth: You can't break us. You can't break the warriors of prison. We get up every day—always isolated without family, with no internet connection, or pets, or reasonably-priced phone access. We get up every day from this mattresses to cheap food & substandard medical care—unable to vote & barely paid at our jobs—and unable to care for our loved ones the way we would hope to. And yet, we get up every day.
>
> Last week, you killed two men who lived at the Fairbault prison. You might not remember their names, but we do. We

> are a powerful piece of resistance. We live by codes. We lean on each other, we check on each other, we take care of those who need care.
>
> We ache for reform, and it is coming. You will not break us.
>
> Yeah, I'll wear a mask. I'll wash my hands. I'll pray for the healing of all people. Every damn day.
>
> Hey COVID, do you hear me? You got nothing.
>
> (Letter from Elizabeth Hawes, PEN AMERICA)

As teachers, scholars, and active citizens committed to community writing and listening, we recognize the compelling approaches to rhetorical resilience that writers like Hawes and the others cited in this chapter embody through their words and actions. We call upon our like-minded peers to extend the community-centered listening tactics modeled by writers behind bars and featured here to other contexts where suppressed people need support in reaching equitable opportunities and life experiences. Academic models of listening and scholarship often fall short of the kinds of active and reciprocal community engagement that we see as a vital component of community-centered listening. We turn to contemporary work being done by transdisciplinary/community-engaged groups like the Alliance for Higher Education in Prison and activist groups like Critical Resistance for Action as exemplars that prioritize community needs and voices. We reach toward organizing and policy work that deploys storytelling and literacy work to advocate for human rights through campaigns that "ban the box" or restore enfranchisement. We recognize sustainable and validating rhetorical nuances in letters from carceral spaces that compel readers to move beyond individuating authors as victims of a corrupt system, shitty circumstances, or poor life choices; rather, we hear a strong calling out of power inequalities as individual letter writers self-select into identity groups and toward collective action that includes participatory action research, co-authorship, and the co-creation of listening opportunities in spaces of extreme inequity. The powerful "we" that Elizabeth Hawes invokes cuts across hundreds of letters and reaches thousands of readers calling all of us to listen in, listen up, and take action.

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