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RADICAL HISTORY *Review*

Political Imprisonment and Confinement



Open Letters from Prison

Mobilizing Communities of Collective Care

Pam Fadem, Rachel Leah Klein, and Benjamin D. Weber

The first documented case of COVID-19 in California was on January 26, 2020. It soon spread to California prisons, where outbreaks and lockdowns wreaked havoc. This new threat facing people inside prison could only be dimly imagined by loved ones, friends, and allies on the outside, who were cut off from usual visitation and other forms of communication, including JPay, email, and phone calls. Within months, reports of new quarantine units such as Building 503 at the Central California Women's Facility, "the world's largest women's prison," made it clear that prison guards, along with California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) policies and practices, were enabling the spread of the deadly virus. The use of medical lockdowns to control and punish further endangered people's lives. Women in prison, like longtime California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) member Laura Purviance, described the lockdowns as being similar to solitary confinement. People inside felt so unsafe, Laura told reporters, some asked family members to take out life insurance policies on them.¹ Amid two deadly pandemics—racial violence and COVID-19—a groundswell of movement building amplified long-standing demands to free political prisoners and, more important, to #Free-ThemAll. In this way, the moment intensified the urgency of prison abolition and gave new meaning to the campaigns to end life sentences, such as CCWP's Drop LWOP (Life Without Parole) coalition, as the pandemic turned all sentences, especially for the most vulnerable, into potential death sentences.²

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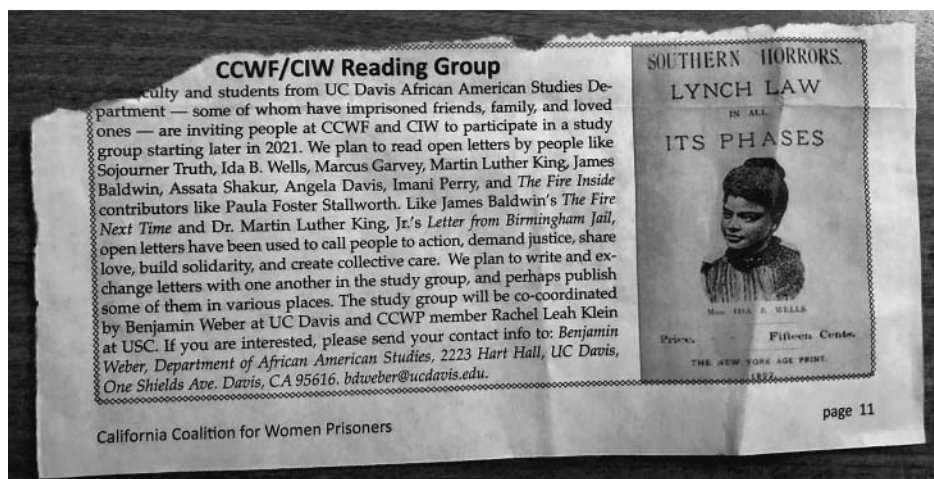


Figure 1. Open Letters Writing Group call for participation, *The Fire Inside*, no. 62 (December 2020).

CCWP's emergency COVID-19 response was in full swing by the fall of 2020, when University of California, Davis, African American and African Studies faculty reached out to CCWP organizers to see what they could do to help.³ As members of CCWP's *The Fire Inside* prison newsletter editorial collective, Pam Fadem and Rachel Klein put the question to incarcerated CCWP members. With time in lockdown extended, in-person visitation completely closed down, and email and phone time drastically reduced, people in prison had returned to writing more handwritten letters. These practices amplified the quotidian ways that prison disrupts family ties and seeks to isolate prisoners from loved ones. Under COVID-19, women in prison were looking for a mental escape, ways to sustain connections and community, and an outlet to process and advocate for issues at the foreground both inside and outside the prisons. Since *The Fire Inside* already circulated through snail mail, the idea for a letter correspondence group clicked. UC Davis faculty member Benjamin Weber, together with Pam and Rachel, put out the call for an "Open Letters Writing Group" in *The Fire Inside* to study famous open letters in Black history and write in the style of the likes of Ida B. Wells, Claudia Jones, Maya Angelou, Assata Shakur, Angela Davis, and Alicia Garza (see fig. 1).⁴

In what follows, we briefly highlight the history of *The Fire Inside* to help frame the Open Letters Writing Group. We then turn to the themes that emerged from members' correspondence with each other and with the public and situate their open letters within the larger history of open letters from prison, as well as their importance in the Black radical tradition and movements to free people from prison. We close with the theme of collective care, thinking through how open-letter writing contributes to that modality, especially in times of COVID-19, when access to community for so many incarcerated peoples has been cut off. As the writing group

member Delina Williams described, “All is well within me, yet here at CCWF the spawning of the Delta has begun so I consider this time to write you a blessing.”

The Fire Inside

The call went out in *The Fire Inside*'s issue no. 62 in December 2020. Twenty incarcerated individuals wrote in, seventeen women and three men. The final group included Asar Amen, Bambari Anderson, Tamara Hinke, Laura Purviance, Jennifer Rose, Mwalimu Shakur, Joyce Schofield, Delina Williams, and Leticia Zepeda. Originally intended as a correspondence study and writing group for people in California's women's prisons, a host of individuals from prisons around the country responded to the call, requesting to join.⁵ Grounded in a Black studies approach to collective storytelling, the writing group used modes of horizontal feedback, reflection, and collaboration in studying the past to write personal narratives about the present and future. Over a year-long process, members of the Open Letters Writing Group wrote reflections about published open letters, exchanged feedback, and then composed their own open letters inspired by those they studied and as a call to action.

At the end of this first round of the writing group, people requested certificates of completion, and we collectively agreed to publish a special issue of *The Fire Inside* featuring the open letters. This was less as an academic accolade and more as an acknowledgment of individuals' accomplishments that could be listed in their parole files. Partnership and collaboration, learning from and alongside each other, and revising and improving their work based on feedback from other incarcerated members were the building blocks of this project. Given the absurd reality that contact between people incarcerated in different facilities may be considered a rule infraction, the months of collective writing and feedback between members via the US Postal Service illustrated a rebellious reciprocity that the carceral state has deemed inherently transgressive.

As written in *The Fire Inside*, “Collective care, mutual respect, resilience, and determination, are the foundations of our community, where our strength and power are built and sustained.”⁶ This commitment and practice also animated the work of the Open Letters Writing Group across six different prisons. Collaborator Joyce emphasized this mutuality in her own open letter, writing, “Spending decades incarcerated and away from my children doesn't stop me from being happy when another inmate is released and walks out these gates of hellish agony and mental suffering, into the loving arms of their loved ones.” Joyce concluded with a resolute call to solidarity: “I embrace every woman, be she behind bars or in the free world. I invite you to take whatever steps necessary so that you too can become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND!” Another writing group member, Delina, affirmed this invocation of collective care in Joyce's open letter, responding, “‘A Woman with a Made Up Mind’ is not only riveting, it left me shaking my head in agreement throughout its entirety.”⁷

Figure 2. Front cover of *The Fire Inside*, no. 65 (November 2021).



CCWP was formed in 1995 to support a class action lawsuit, *Shumate v. Wilson*, that women prisoners initiated against the state of California demanding basic, humane standards of health care. In 1996, CCWP began to publish *The Fire Inside* newsletter, launched by people inside California women's prisons in collaboration with former prisoners and other advocates on the outside as a way to break through the invisibility and silencing of prisoners. It is now the longest published newsletter by, for, and about people in women's prison in the United States and is read by thousands of people both inside and outside prison.

The Fire Inside started with a four-page edition, featuring articles about health-care abuse written by CCWP founding members and lead plaintiffs Charisse Shumate and Linda Fields. The collective wrote a summary analysis of the *Shumate v. Wilson* lawsuit and the conditions that had led the women to sue, dedicating that first issue to Joann Walker, an HIV+ prisoner activist who had fought tirelessly against medical discrimination and neglect before dying in 1994, two months after winning compassionate release. Twenty-five years later, the newsletter has grown to sixteen pages, including art, poetry, and critical analysis of the legal, political, and social issues impacting the lives of community members on both sides of the prison walls (see fig. 2).

CCWP is a unique collaboration between members inside and outside prison, developing advocacy methods based on the experience of women, trans, and gender-nonconforming people in prison to confront and change brutal conditions of confinement, win release for individuals, and challenge the foundations of the criminal injustice system. *The Fire Inside* continues to be a vehicle for communication, collaboration, and advocacy, as well as building and maintaining our community.

Building Community: What the Letters Say

The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) cultivates and thrives on a culture of scarcity, individualism, and pitting people against each other, reifying the idea that they can only survive in opposition to others. The peer nature of the open letters group built on a cooperative process that people in prison struggle to create in opposition to the PIC. The writing process expressed a generous and creative reciprocity that is fundamental to community building and an affirmation of collective care.

The Open Letters Writing Group was framed around well-known political open letters, yet the themes that emerged ranged from personal grief and loss, solidarity, historical reckoning, state racism—particularly under the Trump administration—and feminist consciousness-raising. Equally important to the open letters that people produced was the thorough, thoughtful, and generous feedback that participants gave each other. In what follows, we quote from these letters at length. The group was not about institutionalizing yet another prison education program, predicated on university students and faculty engaging in a one-way exchange with incarcerated people. Instead, the writing group was created in response to the isolation of COVID-19 and the need for connection and community. Here are their words.

“Dearest Mama,” Delina began her open letter. “On October 8, 1988, my whole world collapsed and died when you took your last breath. I did not see it coming. I stayed adrift in sorrow for decades. I could not step into any good thing for too long believing I was unworthy.” These emotions resonated with Joyce, who replied, “As another motherless child, this open letter gripped my soul. The writer led the reader through her decades of pain and misfortunes after losing her mother. I felt my own unresolved issues resurface with her words.” Joyce concluded her feedback by thanking “the writer for sharing such a personal experience with us and to tell her that I understand a daughter’s need for her mother’s love and support. Stay Strong Sister.”

Similarly, Laura addressed her open letter to “To Those Who’ve Been Hurt” and volleyed between speaking in the first person and addressing her audience directly. She reflected on the “counter-productive” system and the workings of the district attorney to limit the life chances of herself and those around her. This point resonated with Jennifer Rose, who responded, “I absolutely love the emotion/

empathy and humanity of both subject and author . . . and the ‘I’ and ‘You’ is a back-and-forth criticism and self-criticism ending in eventual unity ‘if we came together.’”

Open Letters and the Black Freedom Movement

These expressions of solidarity and common humanity were also situated within historical struggles for Black freedom. When Tamara reflected in a letter titled “Where I’m From,” she spoke of her origins in the land of carefree adventures, reggae concerts, theme parks, and camping trips, writing, “Where music is played night and day . . . where the drum became my good friend . . . dance my twin.” This is a place, she tells us, “where ancestors struggled, preserved, and overcame because there are no quitters in my DNA.” Tamara’s knack for poetic prose was further revealed in her letter “Woman,” where she offered the encouraging realization that each woman is already enough to heal and to be loved:

Woman you were born with everything
 You need to reign as Queen!!
 Power, beauty, intellect, self-love
 Creativity and respect—lives in you!!

Her writing struck a chord with member Lety, who responded, “Tamara’s love, pain, optimism, and faith came roaring off the paper. Tamara, believe what you write every second of the blessed day!”

In studying the history of the Black freedom movement, Delina was reminded of how people fighting to expose injustice or struggle for justice have long been cautioned to be patient and wait. “I thought carefully about the Open Letter from the Original Members of the Black Panther Party (O.B.P.P.) and chose to reflect upon it because of its truth and the promise that I believe that can become a reality when we, as Black citizens, resist domination and stand in solidarity to focus on our betterment not only as Black Americans but as human beings,” Delina wrote. One problem, she pointed out, is that Black, as well as other people of color,

appear to continuously settle upon the notion that White Americans in power will “One Day” see the errors of their ways. . . . The Original Black Panther Party [members] have rung the bell upon another notion, which is to say, we Black Americans must not rely on the “wait and see” protocols nor the “let god sort them out” variety of excuses for allowing the one percent to consume not only the labors of love, we as Black Americans, present in earnest but the minds of our promising futures.

She continued: “To address their letter to include not only the elite, but the ‘everyman’ of Black America, the O.B.P.P. have made sure its agenda is clear: To pass on

lessons, wisdom, knowledge and experiences to the next generation of freedom fighters, cultural workers and activists so that the traumas, failures or previous generational mistakes are not given any more.”

Aside from the BPP letter, Delina’s reflections on the state’s counterinsurgent tactic of mandating incremental change speak to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous words from the Birmingham jail, noting how “we know from painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.” Delina offered a sobering reminder that progress is not inevitable. It must be struggled for and won.

Thinking about what have been and continue to be accepted forms of resistance and struggle in the United States, member Lety wrote about the racial double standards of the January 6 insurrection on the Capitol. “On January [6th] the United States capitol was raided by a gang of racists, a hate crime like no other,” Lety wrote. “As I watched the President of the United States urge the mob to go to the Capitol and ‘fight like hell’ I thought Oh, boy that is masterminding at its best. And then I watch as a flood of men and women begin to throw and kick at officers and barriers. I thought instantly had that been a Black or Brown mob we would have been shot on the spot.” Noting the ways resistance against white supremacy has not only been condemned but criminalized, Lety continued, “Had a Black or Brown man or woman said the very same sentence ‘let’s go and fight like hell’ we would be charged with at least aiding and abetting murder, attempted murder, mayhem, burglary, causing great bodily harm, with intent to kill all for the benefit of a gang. We’d be sitting in a jail cell waiting years for a trial that already had a sentence for us.” Questioning the logic of “progress” amid the state’s ongoing disposability of people of color, Lety concluded, “So, no you’re wrong to say I have a pessimistic outlook on racial equality. It is what it is and that is that Blacks and Browns are thrown away people—kill them or lock them up forever is the American motto. I set my mind to dream a way out of this nightmare.”

Lety also took a different approach, writing about the demonization of Latinx people under the Trump administration. In a letter titled “Latina,” she counseled a young woman to not be defeated by the hateful, racist rhetoric coming from the White House. “Niña, do not be ashamed. Your parents may not know English, they will do everything in their power to make sure you succeed,” she reassured. “They say go back to where you came from, but remember your ancestors were here first, your *tias* & *abuelos* were the ones who built the state of California. You belong. They call us servants, gang members, rapists and drug dealers. Do not accept that hate.” She concluded the letter saying, “Do not be ashamed, *eres latina eres americana* and you belong.”

Attuned to the contradictions of a legal system and social order that promotes the protection of property over the rights of poor and marginalized people, Jennifer Rose also directed her open letter to Donald Trump, whose “hate is without

precedent.” “Not my president,” as he clearly couldn’t understand her struggle behind “walls, fences and razor wire.” She ended her letter with the charge:

I ask you to pause . . .
 Stop and consider the laws
 Which protect your property
 And bloody your greedy paws,
 But apparently don’t apply
 To poor peoples’ rights!⁹
 The laws don’t protect
 Black trans lives or so-called gay rights
 Donald Trump, I ask
 You to stop this madness!
 No wall, no ban!
 And please stop Fascist violence!

For Tamara, Lety’s ability to “see systemic racism for what it is, yet dare to dream of a better life” was deeply moving.

Open Letters and Forms of Empowerment

A feminist consciousness and commitment to identifying commonality and difference across the members, and incarcerated women more broadly, was another important theme that emerged from members’ own open letters. For example, Joyce wrote about the abuse that affects the lives of so many women prior to (and during) incarceration, writing,

If I had made up my mind not to accept the verbal and psychological abuse, the name calling and cussing that denied me peace in my own home; if I had sought a friend or even a stranger to talk to; if I had called a center designed to help women . . . if, if, if . . . a thousand times—if! I would be free to be with my children. I would be able to walk in the sand and watch the sunsets. I would be helping my tiny granddaughter with her homework this very day.

It was a point that reverberated with Delina, who replied, “It resonates throughout EVERY fiber of my being because I stayed in the abuse for so long.” She continued, “My heart swells to lift you up in prayer; we have many similarities and I pray there is relief coming your way. Thank you for your thought-provoking letter! It is a Joy to read of your strength, hope and perseverance as you wade through the troubled waters of prison. You are a Wonderful essayist and hope to read more of your work.”

During the writing group, we included not only famous open letters but letters published in *The Fire Inside*. Reflecting on Anna Bell Chapa’s “To My Sister,” published in CCWP’s newsletter in 2000, Laura wrote, “I can relate to the overall tone of regret, ‘if I could . . .’; the hardest part of being incarcerated is living with a

daily numbness of heart-ache and regret. There is so much I want to do for others, but I can't." The barrier to supporting her loved ones is not only being inhibited by the physical geography and isolation of the prison but the reality that "communication (mail, phone calls, etc.) can all too easily be held up by circumstances beyond our control, and it can be intensely stressful to not know what's happening out there."

The last line of "To My Sister" includes the wish for more patience; I feel that patience is something you have to adapt to having in here—if you don't adopt patience and a sense of humor, this place can turn you into a very sad/angry person. At least Anna is wishing for more patience, that is a good sign. . . . This letter truly expresses a sort of longing and heartache I experience in my incarceration.

Each of the open letters was in one way or another a powerful reflection on time, that most precious of resources that we cannot get more of and we cannot get back.

Others felt empowered and inspired by reading letters by or about recognizable figures. Writing about Black Lives Matter (BLM) cofounder Alicia Garza's "Dear Mama Harriet," Jennifer Rose exclaimed,

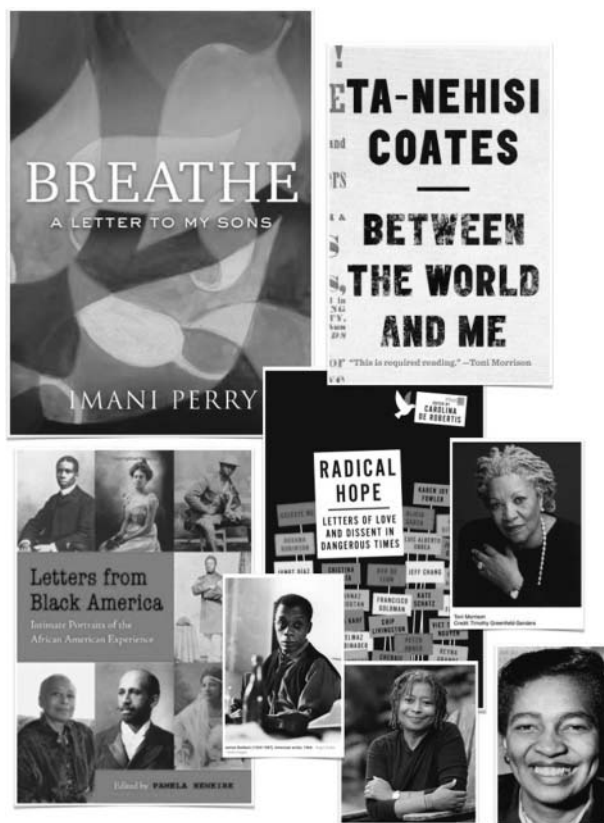
I saw the movie "Harriet" and I just love this open letter (as much as those of Assata Shakur and Claudia Jones!) You can really feel the emotion and power in her words—love and rage! I like how she turns the letter into a prayer to "Mama Harriet" deifying her as a Black Goddess! From Harriet Tubman to Assata Shakur to Alicia Garza, I see an unbroken ancestral lineage of Black Revolutionaries of New Afrikan Freedom Fighters and revolutionary feminist AMAZONS! . . . They are my heroes! #BlackTransLivesMatter.

Jennifer Rose reflected on the way her vulnerabilities fashioned a deep-rooted solidarity for Black freedom. "Although I'm not Black," she wrote,

I'm a White-identified, part-Native/Cherokee two-spirit—an incarcerated transwomxn and anarchist prisoner, I'm also a militant anti-racist abolitionist and revolutionary feminist Amazon! I share the same strength of spirit, enduring 31 years in California prisons as a 13th Amendment prison slave and rebel! Like them, I'm a survivor of abuse, brutality, and torture, still motivated and inspired by the beautiful idea of anarchy/freedom! I'm proud to follow the heroic examples and walk in the footsteps of these beautiful Black sisters who I admit without shame are my idols!

In her feedback to Jennifer Rose, Laura was drawn to her emphasis on solidarity and shared struggles. "I would love to read more along these lines of connecting our 'revolutionary feminist amazon' sisters, how we're all united in our struggles," she responded. "Keep on writing and expressing yourself, Jennifer Rose! I

Figure 3. Collage, Open Letters Readings Packet Cover, Dr. Benjamin Weber.



dig it!” In turn, Laura reflected back her commitment to trans liberation and ending all forms of oppression, writing to Jennifer Rose, “I’ve got love for my trans community, and even though I’ve only endured 8+ years so far in CDCR, I’m passionate to fight against these systems of oppression.”

History of Open Letters from Prison

In the writing group, members carried forward a long tradition of open-letter writing from prison. The mixture of famous and lesser-known open letters drew attention to the everyday practice of prison letter correspondence, which has a deep history and social life of its own (see fig. 3). As women in prison have long demonstrated, forms of connectedness within and across prison walls are expressions of struggles for survival, political organizing, and world-making—asserting a future not defined by prison walls.

When Claudia Jones publicly condemned the genocidal conditions of prisons in defending fellow Black activists and intellectuals in the 1950s, she also wrote poems of solidarity and support for her incarcerated comrades at Alderson Women’s Prison, such as her “*antifascista* sister” Blanca Canales.⁸ For her role in the 1950

Puerto Rican nationalist Jayuya uprising, Canales was sentenced to life in prison plus sixty years. Other Puerto Rican nationalists like Lolita Lebrón, sentenced to fifty years, embodied the racial disparity that Lety pointed out in her open letter about the Trump-incited white supremacist insurrection at the Capitol.⁹ Following Claudia Jones's indictment of "prison Jim Crow," imprisoned activists have often used the open-letter tradition to condemn the racist and gendered violence of prisons as well as to appeal to the world.¹⁰

Open Letters and Prison Organizing

Assata Shakur and Angela Davis used open-letter writing as a practice of world-making on the global and most intimate scales. In her 1998 "Open Letter," Assata Shakur described how she was targeted and criminalized through false accusations and the FBI's infamous COINTELPRO.¹¹ In her "Open Letter to High School Students" from Marin County jail, Angela Davis sought to convey similar truths in her call for the kind of intergenerational solidarity that would animate and sustain the Black freedom struggle. This was not lost on young people either. As eight-year-old Elizabeth Watts wrote in "A Letter from the Youth," "Dear Black Panthers, I think it isn't right for you to be in jail."¹²

Serving as secretary for Angela Davis's defense campaign, the longtime activist Daphne Muse amassed thousands of hand-written letters attesting to these bonds of connectedness across prison walls. The letters in her collection are inseparably intimate and political, as Muse pointed out by referencing a postscript from Angela Davis thanking her for the Tampax. Indeed, she worked to perfect the "art of Black letter writing," corresponding with a pantheon of powerful intellectuals such as Shirley Graham DuBois, Louise Thompson Patterson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jennifer Lawson, Afeni Shakur, Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni over the years. She corresponded with Fleeta Drumgo, Luis Talamantaz, Johnny Spain, and John Cluchette of the "San Quentin Six," and joked in a recent interview how letter writing even made her the object of FBI surveillance: "The government wasted hella money paying someone to follow me," she laughed.¹³ The surveillance and manipulation of prison correspondence has long been a tool to try and disrupt, punish, retaliate against, and harm people inside and outside of prison. As some members of the writing group relayed, they don't always get their mail. Others take care to acknowledge the date and contents they received in case some pages went missing along the way.

The Politics of Prison Letter Correspondence

Acts of collective refusal and direct action inside prison have often been announced or explained through open-letter writing. In 2011, a historic hunger strike against torturous conditions of solitary confinement was initiated by people incarcerated in Pelican Bay State Prison's notorious Security Housing Unit (SHU). The strike

committee's open letters to other incarcerated people throughout the California prison system successfully mobilized thousands of others to join in the hunger strike. When Todd Ashker, Arturo Castellanos, Sitawa Nantambu Jamaa, Antonio Guillen, and others wrote in the *Agreement to End Hostilities* (2012), the call to end the hunger strike, their declaration took the form of an open letter as well: "To Whom it May Concern and to all California Prisoners."¹⁴

Loved ones, friends, and allies have also long used open-letter writing to advocate from the other side of prison walls. While many are familiar with James Baldwin's "Open Letter to My Sister Angela Davis," the history of this kind of movement-building work can be traced across countless lesser-known letters crafted by supporters in defense of those in prison.¹⁵ Safiya Bukhari did not live to see the day that Jericho Movement cofounder Jalil Muntaqim was finally released from prison, as she had so often called for in her public letters to the parole board. As in the recent "Open Letter to the Bureau of Prisons and the State of Georgia by Concerned Academics," allies on the outside are still pushing to see the day that Black Power-era activists like Jalil Al-Amin (formerly H. Rap Brown), Ruchell Magee, and Mumia Abu-Jamal are set free.¹⁶

The Open Letters Writing Group also speaks to ongoing methodological conversations among people in prison, grassroots community groups, activist-scholars, and students of all kinds. In the context of restricted or barred access to other modes of communication, including the proprietary extortionist email systems like JPay and GTL, prison letter correspondence can be seen as a kind of "social reproductive activity," as the ethnic studies scholar Sharon Luk puts it, which establishes "life-sustaining claims of belonging to one another." The "life of paper," as Luk calls it, forms a "creative shelter"—a "shared place to foster social being, provide for its study, and generate a mode of its inhabitation."¹⁷ The anthropologist Orisanmi Burton (who also contributed an article to this issue of *Radical History Review*) theorizes that letter writing from prison is both an "ethnographic and political modality" that people use "to survive within and rebel against domestic warfare."¹⁸ In his recent work on survivors of police torture in Chicago, the anthropologist Laurence Ralph suggests that open-letter writing might provide a new model for justice. By attending to torture survivors' call to "speak the secrets out loud" and thereby giving voice to their painful reality, we might challenge this country's "collective investment in fear" that has been responsible for the torture that is carried out against people in jails and prisons across the country.¹⁹ He proposes "ethnographic lettering" as a method, pushing back on outmoded forms of research in cultural anthropology and adjacent disciplines by engaging people as interlocutors rather than treating them like research subjects; creating opportunities for exchange in the writing process; and understanding the people involved and the communities they want to address as primary co-creators and audience.²⁰

Collective Care and Building Community

The letters flowing back and forth across prison walls demand to be seen as a process of community building and as collective acts of rebellious reciprocity. They are expressions of hope, aspiration, and love. As Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza explained in her open letter “Dear Mama Harriet,” the movement was born out of her profound expression of love for Black people. Fittingly, BLM’s first economic justice campaign was #BlackLoveLetters, through which Black parents wrote love letters to their children.²¹ Similarly, Delina, attesting to the transformative power of open-letter writing, wrote, “I needed, even now, to send forth this letter of love.”

Delina was not alone. While reflecting on various moments of the open-letter writing project, each member spoke of the generosity and reciprocity that emanated from each other. For Lety, it added “positivity to a sometimes dark place.” Delina saw it as a “respite from this lockdown.” Laura recognized the potential “to use this as a form of restorative justice—to use collaboration and conversation for healing and growth.” Along those lines, Joyce wrote, “Being 70 yrs old, this gives me the peace I need in case I don’t make it home, maybe I will still reach and help others.” For Tamara, the feedback from her peers made her emotional. “Their encouragement is validation,” she wrote. “Words are empowering motivators spoken to uplift those in need.”

The Open Letters Writing Group was an outgrowth of the prison abolition work we do, and more importantly, an extension of the ways in which incarcerated people in women’s prisons fight daily against the pervasive carceral culture that not only isolates people from their families, homes, and communities but seeks to disrupt any notion of collective care between people inside—a nightmare that has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Beth Richie, and Erica Meiners wrote in *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, “Incarceration itself has always been a pandemic,” and *prisons were already killing people before COVID-19*.²² We were not under any illusions that this writing group in particular, or prison education in general, is a replacement for real structural change. We reject liberal ideologies of reform and humanism that recognize prisons as appropriate places to “educate” or confine anyone.²³ A cage is still a cage. As Laura wrote, “Freedom feels like home, and my home will never be any prison.”²⁴ And the notion of freedom that Laura brilliantly theorized only takes place in an abolitionist future without policing, surveillance, and prisons.

Nonetheless, the importance of two-way learning and the exemplar of collective care on an everyday scale are vital lessons from which to learn, especially in the United States. As we enter the third year of a pandemic, neoliberal racial capitalism continues to kill the most vulnerable among us. Pinpointing this very mutuality, Delina acknowledged how, through creativity and collectivity, “this program allows like-minded persons to encourage others to be more than a number. To be free

through the writings of our truths as we share our scars, insecurities, as well as our capacity to grow.” Breaking the scarcity logic that governs and infects everything from our institutions to our social relations, collectivity, according to Delina, articulates a different value system through which justice may actually be possible. As she contended, “Collaboration is information and when used to propel justice, kindness and peace, we are on our way to a society that sees past what we once were and allows us, as people, to seek a place at the table not under it.” We have much to learn.

Pam Fadem has been a member of California Coalition for Women Prisoners for over twenty years. She is also a longtime activist in the antiracist, prison abolition, and disability rights communities, and a proud mom and grandma.

Rachel Leah Klein is a PhD candidate and Wallis Annenberg Endowed Fellow in the Department of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. She studies the expansion of the carceral state in the late twentieth century through family separation and motherhood. Prior to USC, Rachel worked as a journalist for *Salon*, writing about criminal justice, race, and culture, and as a professional dancer with the Harlem-based dance company Forces of Nature.

Benjamin D. Weber is a scholar of African American history, critical carceral studies, and Black social and political thought. He is assistant professor of African American and African Studies at the University of California, Davis. His book *American Purgatory* is forthcoming.

Notes

1. Bragg and Sosin, “503: Inside the COVID Unit at the World’s Largest Women’s Prison.”
2. CCWP, “Drop LWOP.”
3. CCWP, “COVID-19 Resources.”
4. CCWP, *The Fire Inside*, no. 62, 11.
5. In line with CCWP’s mission, this report features the contributions of women who participated, asked to share their writing, and chose to publish their open letters. We are deeply grateful to the feminist supporting men who took part in the first group, and we will be doing collaborative planning around widening the next iteration of the correspondence study and writing groups. We are also exceedingly grateful to UC Davis graduate students Marlené Mercado and Michaela Anang for their work on this project.
6. CCWP, “Together We Get Free.”
7. CCWP, “Open Letters Special Issue.”
8. Boyce Davies, *Claudia Jones*, 189–90. See also Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*.
9. Power, “Interview with Lolita Lebrón.”
10. Weber, “Anticarceral Internationalism.”
11. Shakur, “An Open Letter from Assata Shakur.”
12. Watts, “A Letter from the Youth,” quoted in Luk, *Life of Paper*, 199. Many former Black Panthers who were arrested in the 1970s are still in prison today. Ruchell “Cinque” Magee, now eighty-two years old, may well be the longest-held political prisoner in the United States, having been behind bars for fifty-eight years. He was denied parole for the thirteenth time in July 2021.
13. Davis, “Art of Black Letter-Writing.” See also Thuma, *All Our Trials*.
14. Ashker et al., “Agreement to End Hostilities.”

15. Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*.
16. Ali et al., "End the Isolation of Jamil Al-Amin." See also the Jericho Movement, <https://www.thejerichomovement.com/> (accessed May 15, 2022).
17. Luk, *Life of Paper*, 194.
18. Burton, "Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work." See also James, *Warfare in the American Homeland*.
19. Ralph, *Torture Letters*, 185–88, 190.
20. Ralph, *Torture Letters*, 192.
21. Garza, "A Herstory." See also Garza, "Black Love"; Cullors, "Abolition and Reparations"; and Black Lives Matter, #BlackLoveLetters.
22. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, 127.
23. See, for example, Kaepernick, "Abolition for the People."
24. CCWP, *The Fire Inside*, no. 66.

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