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Present from the Inside:

The Letter Writing Practices and Processes

Of Incarcerated Adult Students in a Los Angeles County Jail

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

William Fletcher Haden

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Present from the Inside:

The Letter Writing Practices and Processes

Of Incarcerated Adult Students in a Los Angeles County Jail

by

William Fletcher Haden

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

Professor Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Co-Chair

This study explored the letter-writing practices of incarcerated adult students at a facility within the Los Angeles County jail system. The study sought to understand the role that letter writing plays in the lives of these individuals, their unique composition processes and products, their beliefs about themselves and their skills as writers, and the assets and strategies they use in this literacy practice.

For this qualitative study, I interviewed twelve individuals currently or recently enrolled in an adult secondary education program offered by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department and a



local charter school. During the interviews, participants provided self-selected, handwritten letters to explain and explore their letter-writing processes. The interviews and documents reveal that letter writing, while practically non-existent in contemporary society and their lives on the outside, plays a vital role in participants' carceral experience; most participants wrote their first letter while incarcerated, and many have since developed a strong letter-writing practice and routine. The study reveals that letters and letter writing function as a medium for participants to connect with loved ones and express themselves in ways other forms of communication—namely phone calls and visits—do not provide. Letters provide participants with opportunities to make sense of their carceral experience and themselves in the process, and letters, as tangible objects, function as gifts and personal legacies for recipients on the outside. As students, participants utilize the classroom, their classmates, and instructors to compose and develop their letters, and the authentic practice of letter writing has led to the development of literacy skills over time. The insight, honesty, and vulnerability shared by these participants, both in the interviews and through their personal letters, provide a glimpse into the unique phenomenon of letter writing in the understudied context of jail.

The dissertation of William Fletcher Haden is approved.

Ron Avi Astor

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION PAGE

To Clarence, my Ursa Minor.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION .....	ii
DEDICATION PAGE .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	xi
VITA .....	xii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Background.....	2
The Personal Letter in Corrections .....	3
Letters as Authentic Literacy Practices and Events .....	4
Research Questions.....	6
Study Design.....	7
Site and Participants.....	8
Study Significance .....	8
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
Political, social, and educational perspectives towards correctional education .....	11
Pragmatic approach: correctional education as a means to reduce recidivism.....	11
Holistic approach: correctional education resembling well-rounded, on-campus education .	13
Social justice approach: correctional education as social justice transformation.....	14
Lifelong learning approach: correctional education as a primer for continued education .....	15
Literacy rates of incarcerated adults are lower than the household population.....	16
PIAAC Prison Study .....	16
PIAAC Literacy Level Results and Comparison .....	18

Background Characteristics of Incarcerated Individuals with Less Than a High School (LHS)	
Education .....	18
Incarcerated learners with low skills are motivated to learn and grow .....	20
Effective adult literacy models build on students’ own practices .....	22
Authentic and Contextualized Literacy .....	23
Letter writing as a key literacy vehicle .....	26
The letter-writing practices of incarcerated adults and its relationship to their lives .....	28
Scant research elevates the voice of incarcerated letter writers.....	30
Conceptual Framework.....	31
Living Literacy.....	31
Literacy as a Social Practice .....	35
Funds of Knowledge .....	37
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	40
Research Questions.....	40
Research Design and Rationale .....	41
Methods .....	42
Site and Sample Selection.....	42
Access and Recruitment.....	42
Participants.....	43
Data Collection .....	49
Data Analysis .....	51
Positionality .....	52
Credibility and Trustworthiness.....	53

Ethical Considerations .....	54
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	56
Summary of Findings.....	56
Finding One: Participants describe letters and their letter-writing experience as a form of communication necessitated and shaped by their carceral experience. ....	57
“You guys text; I write. It just comes with the lifestyle.”.....	57
“I went over a decade without using the phone... The only way I communicated was through letters.” .....	62
Finding Two: Letter writing allows participants to express their true selves and make sense of their experiences. ....	66
“That’s the most accurate I can get.” .....	66
Finding Three: Corresponding through letters provides participants the opportunity to say the unsaid and be heard in ways distinct from other modes of communication. ....	72
“Not a lot of people share verbally, but on paper? That’s a whole different thing.” .....	73
“It’s the only way to be heard. It really is.” .....	77
Finding Four: Participants consider the letters they write as gifts and use multiple strategies to personalize their compositions for their recipients. ....	84
“It’s like sending out a gift...I can’t go to the mall [and] buy nothing, so this is my gift.”...	85
“Give them hope...Hope, faith, belief.” .....	92
“After you're gone, your letters—it’s proof you were alive.” .....	95
Finding Five: Participants utilize the classroom, its resources, and their peers to support their letter-writing process. ....	100
“The classroom setting for me is ideal.” .....	100

Finding Six: Participants self-report improving their writing skills over time and show a determination to learn through their letter writing.....	111
“‘This is kind of a self-taught thing for the most part.” .....	111
Growth over Time.....	114
Future Writing Goals .....	116
Conclusion .....	117
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	119
Study Purpose .....	122
Significance and Discussion of Key Findings .....	122
RQ1a: The role of letter writing in participants’ lives .....	123
RQ1b: The letter-writing process.....	126
RQ1c: Views of themselves as writers .....	129
RQ2: The descriptions of letters and letters themselves.....	131
Limitations .....	132
Recommendations.....	133
Recommendations for Educators .....	133
Recommendations for Researchers.....	140
Personal Reflection and Conclusion.....	144
APPENDIX A: JOEL’S LETTER.....	147
APPENDIX B: ULYSSES’ LETTER .....	149
APPENDIX C: ROBERTO’S LETTER.....	151
APPENDIX D: FREDDY’S LETTER .....	155
APPENDIX E: EDGAR’S LETTER.....	156

APPENDIX F: DAVID’S LETTER .....	157
APPENDIX G: TYREE’S LETTER .....	159
APPENDIX H: JOSUE’S LETTERS .....	165
APPENDIX I: RICHARD’S LETTER.....	169
APPENDIX J: MARIO’S LETTER .....	170
APPENDIX K: DERRICK’S LETTER.....	171
APPENDIX L: LAMONT’S LETTER.....	172
APPENDIX M: RECRUITMENT LETTER.....	173
APPENDIX N: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	174
REFERENCES .....	179



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Thank you to the participants of this study. Your legacy now extends beyond and because of your letters.

To Vee, my best friend and wife: another dissertation would not be enough to express my love, respect, and admiration for you. Thank you for being with me.

To Bear: I love you, and I'm proud of you, son.

## VITA

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Letter writing in jails and prisons is a unique, contextual, and cultural phenomenon. Though the practice has waned in the outside world since the introduction of digital communication (Kim et al., 2019; Tadros et al., 2024; Stanley, 2015), personal, handwritten letters play a central role in the lives of incarcerated individuals, regardless of literacy level (Maybin, 2000; Wilson, 2000a). Depending on the facility, access to telephones may be limited and costly, communicating through tablets or other electronic methods varies or is nonexistent, and receiving visits from family and friends may occur infrequently due to distance, time, cost, health, or other restrictions. As such, letter writing remains a primary mode of communication and is integral to incarcerated individuals' routines (Wilson, 2000a; 2011). Despite having lower literacy levels than that of the household population, 82.5% of individuals incarcerated in United States prisons report writing letters or memos every day or at least once a week, including the 30% that have less than a high school education (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). Utilizing an asset-based approach to literacy and learning, this study seeks to better understand the letter-writing practices and experiences of incarcerated writers enrolled in basic and secondary correctional education programs, their perceptions and beliefs about themselves as writers, and the role and function that personal letters play in their lives. By better understanding the informal literacy practices that exist in specific contexts, educators can glean insights that can lead to more effective instructional practices in formal settings (Perry, 2012). Because letter writing functions as a social practice within the context of corrections and is utilized by learners of all levels (Wilson, 2000b; Barton & Hall, 2000), correctional education programs can build upon

their students' existing practice and knowledge of this craft to improve literacy development both in and out of classroom environments. The interpretive findings will support correctional educators in developing pedagogies that practice asset-based teaching and promote authentic learning, leading to increased literacy development and academic self-efficacy of incarcerated students.

## **Statement of the Problem**

### **Background**

Incarcerated individuals, compared to the household population, have significantly lower literacy skills (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). While 14% of the general population does not have a high school diploma, 30% of incarcerated individuals in the United States have less than a high school education, and it is estimated that 75% of incarcerated individuals could be classified as low-literate (Adult Literacy Facts | ProLiteracy, n.d.; Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). Despite these perceived limitations, incarcerated individuals, regardless of measured skill level, engage in multiple literacy practices, often at rates comparable to or exceeding those of the household population (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016; Wilson, 2000a).

Though handwritten letters may be considered dead in contemporary society (Stanley, 2015), roughly eight out of ten incarcerated individuals report writing letters or memos at least once a week or daily (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). Comparatively, only seven out of ten adults in the household population report writing letters and memos at a similar rate, and their experience likely includes communicating through digital means (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016; Stanley, 2015). While technologies such as text, email, and social media have impacted both the form and content of communication between separated individuals on the outside (Danet, 2020; Horst & Miller, 2020; Ling, 2010; Stanley, 2015), for incarcerated

individuals, the handwritten letter is alive, thriving, and continues to function as one of the most prevalent literacy events in which they engage. As one incarcerated individual explained, “We are the last people that write. Nobody writes anymore in the streets. It’s text messages or computer or a laptop. We are the only people that write. Pen and paper is gonna be a museum” (Poor & Thomas, 2019).

Educators at all levels seek to make their instruction applicable in students’ day-to-day lives. However, incarcerated students enrolled in adult basic and secondary education programs question the instruction’s relevance; only 29.3% of incarcerated students report being able to relate what they learn to their everyday lives (Patterson, 2018a). Given such context and need, authentic acts of letter writing outside of the classroom can provide correctional educators an opportunity to build upon the cultural and contextual practice of letter writing to improve the literacy development of incarcerated students. Since adults typically learn what is meaningful to them (Illeris, 2011), this study seeks to better understand the practice and value of letter writing for incarcerated students. The study will provide correctional education programs data to develop authentic, contextualized literacy instruction and curricula relevant to incarcerated adult learners’ lives.

### **The Personal Letter in Corrections**

In a context and community with its own code (Young et al., 2023), the personalized and visualized practice of letter writing in carceral settings is a “culturally approved, validated, and respected” mode of communication (Maybin, p. 195, 2000). For the 82.5% of incarcerated individuals who write letters at least once a week or daily and the 83.4% who read them at the same rate (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016), letters “can be used to mediate a huge range of human interactions; through letters one can narrate experiences, dispute points, describe

situations, offer explanations, give instructions, and so on” (Barton & Hall, 2000, p. 1). The genre of letters is particularly difficult to define (Barton & Hall, 2000), and these texts take on multiple forms within the context of corrections (Wilson, 2000a).

For incarcerated individuals, letters still thrive as a powerful medium for continuing and pursuing relationships, self-expression, and identity construction (Maybin, 2000). An incarcerated individual on California’s death row at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century described the depth and closeness he experienced through letter writing, noting that he “found [himself] being an adviser, counselor, marriage consultant, religious instructor, brother, friend, love, editor, writer, poet” (Maybin, 2000). These different types of correspondence require unique and complex skills that go beyond basic literacy, including, but not limited to, the author’s voice and audience awareness; how one communicates with their judge or attorney is different than with their partner, child, or friend. This type of written code-switching is frequently learned from and within the carceral context and is an often-overlooked asset in the developing literacy practices among incarcerated individuals.

### **Letters as Authentic Literacy Practices and Events**

This study is grounded in the sociocultural perspective of *literacy as a social practice*. This theory defines literacy as “what people *do* with reading, writing, and texts in real-world contexts and why they do it” (Perry, 2012, p. 54). Letter writing, considered one of the oldest forms of writing, derives its meaning and value from the cultural beliefs, practices, and values in which it is situated (Barton & Hall, 2000). Within the culture and context of corrections, handwritten letters exist as a specific social practice and function as a form of authentic literacy in the lives of incarcerated students (Barton & Hall, 2000; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). The term literacy, and specifically functional literacy, in adult education, is increasingly identified with the

skills needed in the context of employment (Papen, 2005; Perry, 2012), but this “ignores or denies the multiplicity of ways in which people meaningfully engage with print materials in their everyday lives” (Perry, 2012, p. 63). Individuals who may be considered “illiterate” in certain contexts that are dominant and valued by those in power may, in fact, be able to read and write in other contexts (Perry, 2012). An asset-based perspective of literacy is required to recognize the multiple types of knowledge required to engage in contextually relevant practices, and the prevalence and frequency of letter writing by incarcerated individuals call for a deeper exploration of this practice and what literacy looks like in the context of incarceration.

For incarcerated students with less than a high school education, increasing one’s knowledge and skills in a subject of interest is the top reason why they enroll in school (Patterson, 2018a; Rampey et al., 2016), yet only 29.3% report being able to relate what they learn to their day-to-day lives (Patterson, 2018a). Research on adult literacy development shows that providing learners with contextualized materials and assignments increases both student motivation and interest in writing (Nielsen, 2015; Street, 2005), and contextualized purposes, in conjunction with an authentic audience, lead to more meaningful learning experiences for adult students (Gillespie, 2001; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Nielsen, 2015). With their context-specific role and authentic recipient, letters provide a unique opportunity for educators to build upon an existing literacy event practiced by incarcerated students rather than imposing a literacy frame from the outside.

To do so, however, much more needs to be understood about incarcerated students’ beliefs about writing and themselves as writers, their practice of letter writing, and their composition process. Correctional education researchers and practitioners may be aware that incarcerated students write letters, but little is formally known about the processes behind the

practice. This study recognizes letter writing as an authentic literacy event within a specific context and community and views the practice from an asset-based perspective. Perry (2012) recommends that

understanding and acknowledging the informal ways in which people gain access to new text and practices in their everyday lives may lead to insights into the effective skills and strategies learners already use that can be built upon in formal instructional settings. (p. 63).

Regarding letters specifically, Barton and Hall (2000) argue that viewing letter writing as a social practice is the most revealing way of investigating letter writing and that a complete understanding of the practice involves an examination of the participants, the process, and the letter itself. Letters written by incarcerated individuals are occasionally utilized in carceral research (Vannier, 2020), but limited contemporary studies exist on the composition of these letters and their meaning in the lives of incarcerated folks. This current study provides a contemporary context for letter writing in carceral spaces, and its purpose echoes Barton and Hall's (2000) call to explore the writer, the process, and the letter for a holistic understanding of letter writing as a practice.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to better understand the letter-writing practices and processes of incarcerated students enrolled in basic and secondary correctional education programs and the role and function that personal letters play in their lives. To do so, research questions were crafted twofold: first, to understand the value of letters for participants and their individual experience of this phenomenon, and second, to allow participants to share their written products



and explore their engagement with their own work. Specifically, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do incarcerated adult students experience their letter-writing practice?
  - a. What role does letter writing play in their lives?
  - b. How do they describe their composition process?
  - c. How do they view themselves as writers?
2. What do students' descriptions of a self-selected letter and the letter itself indicate about the understandings, processes, and assets they bring to letter writing?

### **Study Design**

This qualitative, phenomenological study seeks to understand the letter-writing self-perceptions, experiences, and processes of incarcerated students in the Los Angeles County jail system. Much of the prominent research on literacy for incarcerated populations has been conducted quantitatively (Rampey et al., 2016); while this quantitative data provides necessary breadth, it also risks reducing participants to numbers and statistics, an already existing designation and stigma that incarcerated individuals continually challenge. Echoing this, Chlup and Baird (2010) emphasize that statistical perspectives and data of literacy in corrections may reflect deficits that are devoid of context, generalizing incarcerated populations without acknowledging or understanding the many factors behind the numbers.

The qualitative methods conducted in this study are intended to add depth to existing statistical data through the individualized experiences of research participants, providing a holistic picture not only of letter writing in correctional facilities but also of the individual participants themselves. Through semi-structured interviews, this study is designed to give voice

to a too-often silenced and forgotten population while celebrating a literacy practice in which they engage.

This project focuses on the participants' existing literacy practice of letter writing outside of the classroom context to an array of actual recipients. While students may use the classroom as an opportunity to write their letters, this study does not propose a constructed curriculum, intervention, or assignment that incorporates letter writing explicitly. The interest here is in the phenomenon of authentic letter writing to real individuals by incarcerated individuals enrolled in basic and secondary programs and their experience of that process.

### **Site and Participants**

The Los Angeles County jail system is the largest and arguably most infamous in the nation (*Care First L.A.: Tracking Jail Decarceration*, 2022). The twelve participants in this study are individuals currently incarcerated in Los Angeles Men's Jail (LAMJ), a facility that can incarcerate 5,640 individuals (*LASD.org - Information Detail*, n.d.). These recruited and selected participants were enrolled in the high school diploma program offered by the education unit of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department in partnership with a local charter school. All participants were actively working towards completing their high school diploma or had recently graduated and varied in their educational experience and history. Enrolled students ranged in age from their early 20s to mid-50s and represent a diversity of races, ethnicities, neighborhoods, and levels of educational attainment. Selected students participated in interviews as well as provided samples of their personal letters.

### **Study Significance**

Adult literacy and its remedies are complex issues; incarceration complicates them further. Discussions around the literacy skills of incarcerated populations tend to be mired in

deficit-oriented mindsets; a statement such as “a large proportion of inmates do not use literacy/numeracy skills in life or work during the incarceration” fails to see the value in knowledge and practices that do occur but are often overlooked (Cai et al., p. 30). By focusing on the literacy skills and practices incarcerated individuals engage in, the conversation about literacy in correctional facilities can shift to one that celebrates and builds upon the literacy events within that context. Because of the prevalence and value of letters in carceral spaces, correctional education programs and educators, viewing this literacy practice as an asset, can incorporate letters into the classroom to create opportunities for authentic and contextual learning.

As letter writing is prevalent in carceral settings, researchers often use letters to grow empirical knowledge about correctional facilities, imprisonment, and criminal justice reform (Vannier, 2020). However, few studies describe *how* letters are used in research and *why* they contribute to collective knowledge about the incarcerated experience (Vannier, 2020). Taking that one step further, this study is interested in not only how letters are used in correctional research but also how and why these letters are composed in the first place. The handwritten personal letter exemplifies multiple components of literacy, and this study explores these elements through the letter-writing experiences of incarcerated individuals themselves, highlighting its value and validity as a literacy practice. Examining the letter-writing practices and processes of incarcerated individuals in a large urban jail system may provide a framework that other correctional educators can utilize in other urban correctional facilities to create a model of asset-based, authentic literacy instruction based on existing student practices and objectives (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001).

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I first provide an overview of perspectives on correctional education in the United States. Next, I discuss the literacy rates of incarcerated individuals, the background characteristics of incarcerated students in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) programs, and the educational goals and aspirations of those students. Then, I explore models of literacy instruction in adult education writ large and their implementation in correctional education. Finally, I conclude with an exploration of letter writing as a literacy practice, its prevalence in carceral settings, and its function in the lives of incarcerated individuals.

It is important to note that most correctional education research is primarily conducted with programs, educators, and incarcerated individuals in state and federal prisons; related data from county and local jails is virtually nonexistent, leaving correctional education programs and educational researchers to rely on prison data for jail populations. Montagnet et al. (2021), studying the use of restrictive housing (solitary confinement) in jails—an experience many of the participants in this study have gone through—provided several reasons for the lack of research in jails. First, there is a lack of systematic uniformity across the over 3,000 jails run by local and county jurisdictions, while prisons, under the jurisdiction of state and federal governments, are part of larger, more organized systems. Second, jails are more widely varied in their population, security level, and sentencing status; the turnover rate for the jail population is high as incarcerated folks await trial, sentencing, or transfer to prison. Third, individuals incarcerated in jails are a particularly vulnerable population, “often with lower socioeconomic status, physical or mental health problems, and substance dependence” (p.10). Because of these complex

vulnerabilities, jails—which are frequently understaffed, underfunded, and overcrowded—often have difficulty collecting and reporting data about their facility. This study fills in some of the many gaps in jail education research, but there is still much to do to support and serve this population.

### **Political, social, and educational perspectives towards correctional education**

Dewey and Prohaska (2022) categorize the perspectives towards correctional education into four distinct domains: “[1] pragmatic, resulting in reduced recidivism and increased job opportunities; [2] holistic, resembling on-campus education; [3] social justice, undertaken as a part of transformative cultural change; or [4] an introduction to lifelong learning” (p.435). Their analysis provides a useful frame for better understanding the context and purpose of education in correctional facilities, the attitudes of correctional educators, staff, critics, and advocates, and the experiences of incarcerated students.

### **Pragmatic approach: correctional education as a means to reduce recidivism**

Advocates for the pragmatic perspective towards correctional education view its role as a means to expand future job opportunities and increase social mobility through education, ultimately decreasing an individual’s likelihood of recidivating (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022). Researchers and policymakers often use post-release outcomes as evidence of successful correctional education programs, and since nearly all incarcerated people—95%—reenter their communities, a frequent measure of correctional education effectiveness is the recidivism rates of incarcerated students after their release (Delaney & Smith, 2018; Muhlhausen & Hurwitz, 2019; Patterson, 2022).

Recidivism rates for incarcerated individuals with less than a high school education are as high as 55%; for those with a college education, their recidivism rate drops to 31% (Dewey &

Prohaska, 2022; Lockwood et al., 2012). Participation in correctional education lowers the likelihood that an individual returns to jail or prison, and multiple recent studies link the effectiveness of correctional education programs to this outcome (Bozick et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2014; Delaney & Smith, 2018; Duwe, 2018; Lockwood et al., 2015; Newton et al., 2018; Pompoco et al., 2017; Tighe et al., 2019; Travis et al., 2014).

Research on adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) programs in correctional facilities shows that these types of programs reduce recidivism and prepare adults for employment opportunities in their communities (Cai et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2014; Patterson, 2022). Investment in ABE/ASE programs in correctional facilities is key; while about half of all previously incarcerated people return to prison within five years, those with less than a high school education have a higher likelihood to recidivate (Delaney & Smith, 2018; Lockwood et al., 2012; Muhlhausen & Hurwitz, 2019; Patterson, 2022). Most correctional facilities offer basic education opportunities, but unless required, participation is low (Patterson, 2022), resulting in a population that reenters their community with essentially the same skills they possessed when they were first incarcerated (Klein & Tolbert, 2007). Incarcerated individuals reentering their communities with low skills in literacy, digital literacy, or numeracy often have a difficult time finding employment and adjusting to their new circumstances (Cai et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2004; Patterson, 2022; Tyler & Kling, 2006). If these individuals gain and build upon these basic skills while incarcerated, however, these potential struggles decrease (Patterson, 2022).

One of the main criticisms of the pragmatic approach argues that “the focus on recidivism is a flawed metric that fails to properly acknowledge the significant barriers that a felony conviction poses for finding and keeping employment when formerly incarcerated people return

to community” (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022, p. 436). The emphasis on correctional education’s cost-saving benefits to taxpayers is also a critique, with critics arguing that this reductionist approach risks dehumanizing incarcerated folks and that this view would not be applied to students on outside campuses (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Scott, 2018). Gould (2018) adds that the emphasis on recidivism, money, and public safety does not account for the unquantifiable benefits of education.

### **Holistic approach: correctional education resembling well-rounded, on-campus education**

A second perspective towards correctional education, the holistic approach, argues that correctional education should be no different from the well-rounded approach to education found on school campuses (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022). This view mirrors that of a liberal arts education that focuses on understanding the whole human condition. While this approach is admirable, its success is infrequent; in the United States, Dewey and Prohaska (2022) cite the national Bard Prison Initiative from Bard College in New York as one of the few exceptions (Karpowitz, 2017). Another example of this type of approach can be found in the greater Los Angeles area: the Prison Graduate Initiative, launched in 2016 by California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), provides a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication for incarcerated men at California State Prison, Los Angeles County, located in Lancaster, CA (*citation*); in partnership with Chaffey College, CSULA also offers a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies at the California Institute for Women in Chino, CA. In these programs, incarcerated students take three to four in-person courses per semester toward their bachelor’s degree. Internationally, “the import model” from Norway is the “most complete realization” of the holistic approach, as educators, mentors, staff, and healthcare providers work together to support incarcerated individuals both pre- and post-release (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022, p. 436).

Advocates for this approach note the potential of distance learning to provide holistic education, though even supporters of distance learning in correctional facilities acknowledge its limitations due to limited or nonexistent access to the internet, lack of support, and the requirement of extreme discipline and motivation on the part of incarcerated students (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Hancock, 2010; Hughes, 2012; Matthew, 2011; Pike & Adams, 2012). Additionally, attitudes from both incarcerated folks and correctional staff that education is “elite” may limit the implementation and effectiveness of holistic educational programs (Watts, 2010). MacKenzie (2008) lists some of the potential complications that may impede the holistic approach, including “restrictions on classroom time and space, security concerns prohibiting internet access, lockdowns, facility transfers, and limited post-release contact between students and their instructors (as cited in Dewey & Prohaska, 2022, p. 436). Castro and Brown (2017) suggest that these limitations all but ensure that the holistic approach to correctional education can neither be compared to nor reproduced in the same way as school campuses on the outside.

### **Social justice approach: correctional education as social justice transformation**

This third perspective, the social justice approach, views correctional education as a reaction to the school-to-prison pipeline (Kirp, 2021) and the correctional classroom as an emancipatory site where social, personal, and educational transformation can occur (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Lempert et al., 2015). Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) was largely responsible for highlighting and making known the disproportionate racial disparities entrenched in the criminal justice system, and in recent years, there has been a calling to address this blight; correctional education has been one such means. Dewey and Prohaska (2022), building on the work of Carver and Harrison (2016), describe the social justice approach to correctional education as including:



...a systems approach to understanding prison as an institution that houses a disproportionate number of people marginalized by poverty, substance use disorder, and historical legacies of racism and classism, and acknowledges the wide-ranging impacts of mandatory sentencing legislation and punitive drug laws as issues of fundamental democratic concern. (p. 437)

Carver and Harrison (2016) view correctional education as a potential democratic solution to the social, economic, and racial injustices ingrained in the criminal justice system, and both critical theory and emancipatory pedagogy often drive these educational pursuits (Castro & Brawn; 2017; Thomas, 1995) with the goal of “equity, human dignity, and the creation of just and democratic communities” (Beck et al., 2022, p. 163).

Critics of this approach frequently cite the conflicting interests of idealistic outside educators and prison administration, staff, and the system itself (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Ginsburg, 2019). Castro and Brawn (2017), the former a nonincarcerated instructor and the latter an incarcerated student, discussed the limitations of the social justice approach and critical praxis in correctional education, primarily due to the constraints imposed by the mass carceral system and context. Notably, they cite the risk of reinforcing and reproducing the power structures when the incarcerated student’s positionality is not considered because of the strictures imposed by their context.

### **Lifelong learning approach: correctional education as a primer for continued education**

The fourth and final perspective of correctional education proposed by Dewey and Prohaska (2022) is the lifelong learning approach. This view argues that correctional education programs should encourage incarcerated individuals to continuously build their skills and interact with others through education and self-development (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Pastore,

2018). Because incarcerated individuals have often had negative experiences with education in the past (Smith et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2020), the correctional classroom can be a space where one redefines their relationship with education and themselves as a learner (Carrigan & Maunsell, 2014). Evan et al. (2018) studied how participation in education while incarcerated positively impacts participants' sense of empowerment and motivation, countering the negative self-stigma incarcerated individuals often apply to themselves. Additionally, Wright (2014) explored how correctional education and correctional educators provide incarcerated students opportunities to expand their identities beyond "the prisoner" by creating spaces—the classroom—that allow them to take on new roles as students and learners. The goal of the lifelong learning approach is "a reclamation of human dignity in difficult circumstances with the goal of uplifting incarcerated people on multiple levels" (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022, p. 437). Unlike the other perspectives of correctional education, the lifelong learning approach has few critics, given its politically neutral approach, though there is often and always the attitudes of prison staff and the general public that believe any education provided to incarcerated folks is soft or weak on crime (Michals & Kessler, 2015; Wright, 2014).

### **Literacy rates of incarcerated adults are lower than the household population**

#### **PIAAC Prison Study**

The most recent and thorough data measuring the cognitive skills of incarcerated individuals and obtaining demographic information from those participants comes from the U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Incarcerated Adults conducted from February through June of 2014 (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). The PIAAC is a large-scale, multi-national study of adult skills developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and conducted in the

U.S. by the National Center for Education Statistics (Rampey et al., 2016). The PIAAC survey assesses a broad range of abilities and collects information on individuals' skill use and background. PIAAC utilizes four core competency domains to measure adult cognitive skills: literacy, reading comprehension, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. The primary goal of the PIAAC literacy assessment is to measure everyday literacies, defined as "understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Rampey et al., 2016, p. 2). While the quantitative data related to literacy rates of incarcerated individuals only tell part of the story (Chlup & Baird, 2010), the numbers are important to provide a broad—albeit decontextualized—overview of the population and to underscore the need for educational programming in correctional facilities.

Unlike the PIAAC household study, which was administered in several countries, the prison study was conducted only in the United States (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Rampey et al., 2016). Ninety-eight state and federal prisons participated in the survey, of which 80 were male-only or coed, and 18 were female-only (Rampey et al., 2016). Of the 1,315 incarcerated adults, ages 18-74, who completed the survey and the background questionnaire, 1,048 identified as male and 267 identified as female. Incarcerated adults were tested with the same assessments as the household population but were given a background questionnaire that was modified to more closely align with their incarceration experience. The background questionnaire for the prison survey focused on

...collecting information about various educational and training activities in prison, such as participation in academic programs and ESL [English as a Second Language] classes,

experiences with prison jobs, and involvement in vocational and nonacademic programs such as employment readiness classes. (Rampey et al., 2016, p. A-4)

### **PIAAC Literacy Level Results and Comparison**

PIAAC reports score ranges from 0 to 500 for its literacy, numeracy, and reading comprehension domains, and scores were classified into one of five levels: Below Level 1 (0-175), Level 1 (176-225), Level 2 (226-275), Level Three (276-325), and Levels 4/5 (326-500) (Patterson, 2022; Rampey et al., 2016). On this scale, both the incarcerated population and household population average score were within the Level 2 range, but the incarcerated population averaged lower—249—compared to the household population’s average score of 270 (Rampey et al. 2016). Overall, 29% of the incarcerated population scored lower than Level 2 compared to 19% of the household population. As this proposed study focuses on the literacy skills of incarcerated individuals enrolled in adult basic and secondary education programs, i.e. below high school, it is important to note that, though not statistically different from the household population, the average literacy score of those without high school credentials is 224, and nearly half (48%) of the surveyed population scored below Level 2.

### **Background Characteristics of Incarcerated Individuals with Less Than a High School (LHS) Education**

Of the 1,319 incarcerated adults who participated in the PIAAC prison study, 461 were enrolled in basic skills programs, GED, or other high school equivalency programs, with 93.5% identifying as male (Patterson, 2022). According to Patterson (2022), the weighted sample of these 461 adults indicated nearly 433,000 incarcerated adults in basic correctional education programs in the United States. Notably, this number does not account for those enrolled in programs offered in local and county jails. The median age group for incarcerated adults with

less than a high school education (LHS) is 25-34 years (Patterson, 2018). This median age group is the same for men, but women tend to be older; their median age group is 35-44 years. The educational attainment levels of incarcerated students in basic education programs were nearly evenly divided between less than high school (52.9%) and some high school (47.1%) (Patterson, 2022). In an earlier analysis of PIAAC's prison study data, Patterson (2018) noted that women tend to successfully complete ninth grade, while men, on average, complete eighth grade. For both genders, approximately two in five LHS incarcerated adults leave school by the age of 15. For both genders, two in five students left school for school-related reasons, and three in five left for external reasons. The top reasons for leaving school for men were incarceration (18.5%), not liking school (17.8%) and wanting to work (17.4%). For women, the top reasons were pregnancy/illness/disability (26.7%), not liking school (20.7%), and family illness or death (11.5%).

Compared with the employment rates of the general population, LHS incarcerated adults had higher rates of underemployment and unemployment, with only three in five men and one in three women earning income and wages from work before their incarceration (Patterson, 2018). This finding is significant, as getting a job post-release is one of the top reasons LHS incarcerated adults enroll correctional education programs (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Patterson 2018, 2022). For all incarcerated students, the goal of future employment opportunities is secondary to the main reason for participation in correctional education: to increase knowledge or skills in a subject of interest (Rampey et al., 2016). One in three LHS incarcerated students selected increasing knowledge and skills as their top choice, while one in five chose increasing their chances of employment post-release (Patterson, 2018). A significant source of tension embedded within the desire for more knowledge is the opportunity to relate these new ideas to

real life. Nearly four in five (78.9%) of LHS incarcerated students report liking to learn new things to a high degree, yet only 29.3% report being able to relate what that they learn to their everyday lives (Patterson, 2018). If seven out of ten incarcerated students are unable to connect and incorporate what they are learning in the classroom, then correctional education programs, administrators, and educators themselves need to develop curriculum and pedagogies that are relevant to the lives of incarcerated learners.

### **Incarcerated learners with low skills are motivated to learn and grow**

Manger et al. (2006) found that incarcerated individuals who self-reported reading and writing difficulties were more likely to enroll or intend to enroll in secondary correctional educational programs than those who did not report such challenges. This finding indicates that incarcerated individuals may be willing students who view correctional education as an opportunity to improve their skills (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Jones & Manger, 2020). In addition to acquiring new knowledge and skills (Manger et al., 2010), Greek researchers found that incarcerated individuals pursued education to intellectually escape their imprisonment and to pursue learning for its own sake (Dewey & Prohaska, 2022; Panitsides & Moussiou, 2019). Meyer (2011) found that increases in skills can increase educational aspirations for incarcerated individuals, so the willingness of low-skilled learners to participate in basic and secondary correctional education has potential implications for future educational participation. Using the PIAAC Prison Study data, Delaney and Smith (2019) examined the educational aspirations of incarcerated individuals and found that 64% of LHS incarcerated individuals aspired to attaining their high school credential; the remaining 36% aspired beyond high school to postsecondary education. The authors call on correctional education programs to build upon the interest in

education that exists among incarcerated individuals, focusing on skill-building that may then create higher educational aspirations.

Adults with low skills often lack proper preparation for learning due to St schooling experiences in the past and may not possess particular characteristics, such as motivation and persistence, that are associated with academic success (Smith et al., 2020). The majority of LHS incarcerated students, however, show a readiness to learn that counters those assumptions (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Jones & Manger, 2020). Readiness to learn—one of Knowles’s (1970) assumptions about adult learning—exhibited in adults with low skill levels is significantly related to skill use, proficiency, and improvement (Smith et al., 2020).

In addition to readiness to learn, Windisch (2019) recognizes five broad motivations consistent in adult basic skills research that influence student engagement and persistence: motivation related to personal goals (Sticht, 2001); motivation for personal development; motivation to help with children’s schoolwork (Finlay, Hodgson, & Steer, 2007; Sticht, 2001); motivation to fulfill or be qualified for work-related criteria (Nicolay, 2017); and motivation to access a better job (Vorhaus et al., 2011). For incarcerated learners, motivations for pursuing education while incarcerated include the possibility of reducing their sentence and the alleviation of boredom (Panitsides & Moussiou, 2019). Additionally, incarceration provides a relatively stable environment that enables learners to attend school regularly (Jones & Manger, 2020), whereas participation in adult basic education programs in community settings is often erratic due to life situations and where gains in skill may be lost due to inconsistent instruction and practice (Comings, 2007; Smith et al., 2020).

When adult students have more than one motivation to learn, they are more likely to persist and engage in basic skills programs (Siebert, 2003). It is important, then, for educational

researchers and correctional educators themselves to capitalize on the educational aspirations, readiness to learn, and other motivations of incarcerated individuals by viewing carceral spaces as legitimate sites of learning (Delaney & Smith, 2019). Behan (2014) suggests that education in correctional facilities “needs to distinguish itself from state-sponsored rehabilitation programs and stand on the integrity of its profession, based on principles of pedagogy rather than be lured into the evaluative and correctional milieu of modern penality” (p. 20; Dewey & Prohaska, 2022). In order to do so, effective instructional principles and practices must be utilized in the classroom to best support the development and learning of incarcerated students.

### **Effective adult literacy models build on students’ own practices**

Despite the prevalence of low literacy rates among adults, especially within the incarcerated population, there remains a “dearth of adult literacy writing research” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 144). The goal of literacy instruction, for both adults and children, is to develop literate beings who will use their reading and writing skills to better negotiate the world and the demands of life (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). Purcell-Gates et al. (2002) suggest that while standardized assessments measure the *ability* to read and write, they fail to capture the *practice* of reading and writing. Success in literacy instruction, therefore, is increased engagement in many and varied literacy practices; researchers and practitioners refer to this outcome as the actualization of literacy instruction. Within adult literacy there is a general recognition of the importance of the student life context; authentic literacy focuses on how context can be used in instruction (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001). Authentic literacy instruction incorporates the building of skills by using materials and texts that are relevant to the lives of learners. Authentic literacy suggests that “if school is to serve as a location for literacy education that hopes to ready the student for real-



world literacy, it should avoid simulations and have students engage in literacy practices that connect them to their lives outside of school” (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001, p. 574).

### **Authentic and Contextualized Literacy**

In order to achieve this outcome, the leading belief among academics and adult literacy leaders is that the most effective type of literacy instruction for adult learners is 1) collaborative and responsive to the lives of learners and 2) uses authentic literacy activities and materials (Purcell-Gates et al, 2002). Authentic literacy refers to literacy work and practices that occur in the lives of students *outside* of the classroom. Research suggests that this distinction between authentic literacy practices and school-only ones is important, as students learn best when instructional materials reflect and incorporate their prior experiences (Fingeret, 1991; Scribner, 1997; Purcell-Gates et al, 2002) and when classroom activities are informed by themes present in adult learners’ lives (Freire, 2018; Glen, 1996; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). Adult students are often seeking skills they can use in the current contexts of their lives and seek to use materials that target their day-to-day experiences (Freire, 2018; Purcell-Gate et al., 2002). Incarcerated adults are no different; they, too, desire skills, content, and experiences that apply to and can be incorporated into their daily lives and contexts (Rampey et al., 2016; Patterson, 2018; Delaney & Smith, 2019). Given the known prevalence of letter writing practiced by incarcerated individuals (Cai et al., 2016), the personal letter may be one of the few authentic literacy practices incarcerated students engage in to develop their literacy skills as it is incorporated into their daily lives and contexts. Using the definition of literacy as that of cultural practice (Gee, 1992; Purcell-Gates, 1993, 1996b; Purcell-Gates et al., 2001), this study explores letter writing as an authentic literacy practice within the carceral culture and context.

Authenticity is an often-problematic term when used by educational researchers and practitioners because there is no set definition used by the field (Wargo, 2020). Behizadeh (2014) defines authentic learning activities as opportunities for students use their lived experience as a way of connecting to the real world and making an impact (Wargo, 2020). Relatedly, Shmier (2014) views authentic learning as any event that incorporates student experience and expertise as resources to enable skill development, with the goal of later using acquired skills in real-world scenarios (Wargo, 2020). Authentic literacy contains two dimensions, purpose and text (Duke et al., 2006). Wargo (2020), building on the work of Duke et al. (2006) in her development of authentic writing assignments as a conceptual framework, suggests that for student writing in the school environment to be highly authentic, it “must result in an authentic text written for an authentic purpose” (p. 539). Letter writing meets these criteria for incarcerated learners.

Using authentic literacy materials and activities in the adult education classrooms is further supported by research on the role that context plays in learning (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). Contextualized practices build upon authentic ones in that they are specific to the individual needs of students and transcend the classroom to address real-life communication rather than imitating or recreating it through authentic materials (Nielsen, 2015). To be truly contextualized, learning experiences have to go beyond the classroom and have an authentic audience and application. Sticht (1988) found that adult education programs that focused on workplace literacy and incorporated job-related materials in their instruction showed an increase in both general and job-related literacy. Transferring skills between contexts—in-class learning to out-of-class practices—is difficult, and growth in literacy potentially lost if not practiced in real-life situations (Brizius & Foster, 1987; National Center on Adult Literacy, 1995). Providing adult learners with contextualized materials and assignments increases both student motivation

and interest in writing (Nielsen, 2015; Street, 2005). Contextualized purposes, in conjunction with an authentic audience, lead to more meaningful learning experiences for adult students (Gillespie, 2001; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Nielsen, 2015).

In theory, adult education programs promote this type of literacy instruction that incorporates authentic materials borne from the lives of adult students; in practice, however, most adult education programs rely on materials and instruction that is decontextualized from their lives and comes from scripted curriculum (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001; Rogers, 2004; Young et al., 1994). These canned curriculums, however, may support adults in developing sequential skills that fill in what may have been missed in previous schooling (Gottesman et al., 1996 Greenberg et al., 1997; Rogers, 2004), and this approach is believed to be best suited for low-literate students (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001). In reality, literacy instruction in adult education is an overlapping and blending of both authentic literacy instruction and decontextualized practices, where decoding and comprehension strategies are taught in contextualized models and skills-based models value vocabulary and texts that are recognized and of interest to students (Chall, 1999; Curtis, 1997; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002). Regardless of model, students' life contexts are recognized and incorporated in adult literacy instruction (Purcell-Gates et al., 2001).

Relatedly, Turner (2020), in a study exploring the perspective of adult learners on writing and instruction in community adult basic education programs, examined tensions between the way instructors perceive the writing experiences of their students and the way students describe their own experiences of writing. Key differences were found in how both groups perceived the process, enjoyment, and feedback of writing. Where instructors valued product over process, students privileged prescriptive practices for developing skills. Although instructors believed that students did not enjoy writing because it is hard and they did not willingly engage in what the

instructors believed to be enjoyable, students unequivocally stated that they do enjoy writing *because* it is hard and it helps them improve in more practical writing at home. Regarding feedback, instructors, with awareness of the non-academic and emotional lives of their students, were cautious in the feedback given so as to not create negative feelings. In contrast, adult students were eager for feedback in order to learn from their mistakes.

### **Letter writing as a key literacy vehicle**

Letter writing is one of the most pervasive literacy activities across societies in both formal and informal contexts throughout history (Barton & Hall, 2000), yet the practice of the handwritten personal letter has declined with rise of electronic communication in the past few decades (Stanley, 2015). However, this once prevalent literacy event is still practiced by incarcerated individuals and those who correspond with them. Parallel to the decline of letter-writing practices of the general public is the lack of research on letter writing as a literacy activity in contemporary research, even with regard to incarcerated populations.

Barton and Hall (2000), in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, note that personal letter writing is often a self-taught literacy event, and even young, inexperienced letter writers show almost instinctive ability to utilize dialogic conventions. Letters themselves are reported as some of the earliest forms of writing, and many contemporary genres have originated in letters, from newspaper articles to scientific journals to the novel (Kenyon, 1992; Barton & Hall, 2000). Many books in the Bible originated as letters (Barton & Hall, 2000)—including Paul the Apostle’s epistles written in prison.

Books on how to write letters have been in existence for hundreds of years, and the formalized teaching of letters has been a component of the US education beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Barton & Hall, 2000; Schultz, 2000). Schultz (2000) explores how letter writing

instruction for children was situated in the ideology of the time, valuing social order, character, and Christian morality. This, she argues, led to letter writing as a form of cultural capital, one that was denied to millions of children through the lack of representation in instructional manuals.

Both the research and practice of letter writing may be dated, but they remain relevant for those affected by incarceration. Much of Wilson's (1996, 1999, 2000a) research at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows that letter writing is a fundamental and literacy-oriented social activity that has always been integral to the lives of incarcerated individuals. Wilson (2000a) cites a book on prisoners in London written over 100 years before her own research that mirrored her own observations: Incarcerated individuals were considerably more literate than was assumed by the ideology of the times and correctional education should not be seen as the panacea for recidivism. She cites a specific passage from Mayhew and Binney's *Criminal Prisons of London* (first published in 1862) that served as a catalyst for further research on the importance of letters for incarcerated individuals:

[T]here is hardly a cell that is not furnished with some fancy letter-bag, worked by the prisoner...and we were assured that the documents treasured in such bags are prized as highly as if they were so much bank-paper, and that in the moments of sadness which overcome prisoners, they are invariably withdrawn and read—perhaps for the hundredth time—as the only consolation left them in their friendlessness and affliction. (Mayhew & Binny, p.194 as cited in Wilson, 2000a)

Wilson's (2000a) research adds an important perspective to the personal letter in carceral spaces by not only focusing on the content of letters, but also their material value, the action of re-reading old letters, and paraliteracy features that align with the five senses. My own field notes

and observations echo those sentiments over 20 years after Wilson's initial research, and the importance placed on receiving and owning letters is equally shown in the act of writing and sending them. What is still unknown about the practice of letter writing by incarcerated individuals, however, is how these writers give voice to this value and the processes they use in composing their letters.

### **The letter-writing practices of incarcerated adults and its relationship to their lives**

Maybin (2000) notes that personal letter writing, while beginning to decline as a primary form of communication even at the time of her study, still exists as a powerful medium for self-expression and the development of relationships in certain contexts. For Maybin, that context was prison, specifically incarcerated individuals on death row in US prisons and their pen friends in the United Kingdom. Maybin's (2000) study argues that the correspondence between these two disparate groups should be viewed as literacy practice and that the event serves both personal and social functions in the lives of participants. For those writing on death row, "letter writing is a major channel for the expression of certain moral and human attributes which are essential to the prisoner's retention or recovery of their sense of being a person" (p. 152). While her participants were a specific sect of incarcerated individuals—those sentenced to death row—and they exhibited varied skill levels—from barely literate to accomplished and fluent writers—her findings on the role and function of letter writing supports the need for further study amongst incarcerated individuals in other circumstances.

Regardless of skill level, Maybin (2000) found that participants had used their time while incarcerated to improve their literacy skills. Most of the participants did more writing in prison than they had before:

One man reported ‘I write daily to keep up with everybody, two or three letters a day’; another said ‘I write every day and sometimes sixteen hours a day’. A man who had been on death row for ten years wrote, ‘I write 280-300 letters a month and have written as of today 18,328 letters since the day of my incarceration’. (p. 158)

Another man who had since been executed at the time of the study’s publication wrote,

The only writing I did in the free world was school work but when I got locked up at age 17 I learned immediately it [letter writing] was my connection to the world and how I was going to get whatever I wanted out of it...Most of our time, our life is the correspondence, we love, we cry, get upset, hurt, share sexual experiences and fantasies, we grow, we learn and we live. (p. 159)

This individual’s comment about learning to write letters during their incarceration speaks to the wealth of knowledge that one may formally or informally obtain within a specific community and context (Yosso, 2005). The writing of letters provides incarcerated individuals opportunities for both the management and development of relationships and the construction and presentation of self (Maybin, 2000); one individual on death row enjoyed the safety of letters because they provided an opportunity to be vulnerable with another person without facing potential consequences of embarrassment or shame. Wilson (2000a) observed how incarcerated individuals often displayed the letters they received in order to signal to others, as well as themselves, that they retained a life outside of the carceral space.

Wilson (2000a) categorizes written correspondence within correctional facilities into three groups: letters between incarcerated individuals, letters between incarcerated individuals and authority, and letters between incarcerated individuals and their communities outside the carceral environment. Letters between individuals incarcerated within the same facility—notes

commonly known as *kites*—are generally sent subversively from peer to peer through numerous creative means and are intended for a restricted and specific audience; letters written to authority figures often conform to standard letter-writing conventions and maintain a more formal tone; and letters written to family and friends outside, with knowledge that their mail can be searched before being sent out, are opportunities for individuals to maintain relationships and their personal identities (Wilson, 2000a).

### **Scant research elevates the voice of incarcerated letter writers**

Letters written by incarcerated individuals have been vital in growing the collective understanding of the incarcerated experience, but limited research exists on the practices and processes of letter writing itself. Vannier (2020) provides a review of the ways in which letters have been utilized in prison research, primarily through authentic, descriptive details of solitary confinement (Reiter, 2016), long-term sentences (Wright et. al, 2017), death row (Maybin, 2000), daily routines (Rubin, 2017), prison power dynamics (Chamberlen, 2016; Scott, 1991), conditions (Jewkes, 2012; Reiter, 2016b), penal trends (McLennan, 2008; Meranze, 1996). In these areas of prison research, letters function as windows into unseen worlds. Vannier's (2020) study explores how to methodologically use letters in research; this study intends to explore how these letters are composed in the first place.

While some of the research on authentic literacy instruction written at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century mentions letter writing as a real-world literacy that can be utilized in the classroom (Auerbach, 1995; Fingeret, 1991; Purcell-Gates et al., 2001), current research fails to do so. This is understandable as letter writing is no longer a widespread form of communication among the general population. For incarcerated individuals, however, letters continue to be intertwined in their daily lives and serve as prominent sources of literacy activity. Within that research, only the



work of Maybin (2000) and Wilson (2000a, 2000b) focuses explicitly on the letter writing practices of incarcerated individuals.

In her exploration of the letters of incarcerated individuals serving life without parole (LWOP) in California, Vannier (2020) notes that several letters included in her study were “twin letters” that were nearly identical aside from the author’s name, age, ethnicity, and personal background. Despite the similarities, Vannier includes these letters in her study, noting that “copying the structure and format could...be perceived as borrowing technical skills from a more confident and literate writer because writing is a hard task to complete” (p. 256). Rather than viewing this as an attempt at manipulation, Vannier instead recognizes these letters as attempts for incarcerated folks to have their voices heard and experiences shared.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Living Literacy**

This study utilizes a conceptual frame of adult literacy put forth by Susan L. Lytle (1991) in her influential article “Living Literacy: Rethinking Development in Adulthood.” Lytle developed this framework in response to negative assumptions about low-literate adult learners, conflicting conceptions of literacy, and the ways in which learning occurs in adulthood. She suggests a “living literacy” of adults “built on assumptions of dignity and competence, of literacy as reflective and self-critical practice, and of learning as participatory” (p. 131). Her conceptual framework includes four dimensions of literacy that interact with one another at the individual level as well as in social and cultural contexts: 1) *beliefs*, adult’s own evolving theories about literacy; 2) *practices*, the variation of literacy exercises used in daily life; 3) *processes*, ways to manage particular reading and writing tasks; and 4) *plans*, what adult learners themselves want

to learn and their learning goals. This study utilizes Lytle's four dimensions to analyze the literacy development of adult students through letter writing.

### ***Beliefs***

*Beliefs*, the first aspect of adult literacy development, focuses on learners' own evolving theories about literacy, language, learning, and teaching (Lytle, 1991). The beliefs that adults have about literacy are critical to their enhanced development as these beliefs inform and interact reciprocally with the other dimensions of practices, processes, and plans. Many of these attitudes toward literacy and learning are borne from previous schooling experiences; regardless of how much time was spent in school, powerful memories and images of school inform adult learners' beliefs (Lytle, 1991). Adult students with low skills have often had negative experiences in school (Smith et al. 2020), and for both incarcerated men and women, one of the top reasons for initially dropping out of school is not liking it (Patterson, 2018). These negative experiences inform beliefs that can constrain learners' development (Lytle, 1991). Adults often recount—and recreate—these experiences by describing their attitudes and expectations toward their own literacy enhancement, potentially limiting their growth.

In contrast to these self-limiting beliefs exhibited in adult learners with low skills, the majority of incarcerated students enrolled in basic and secondary education programs show a readiness to learn and a positive valuation of correctional education as an opportunity to improve their skills (Delaney & Smith, 2019; Jones & Manger, 2020). Learning that occurs outside of the context of school is an important source of beliefs and may provide an impetus for development and learning (Lytle, 1991). As this development occurs, adults may view their own skills and abilities as more malleable, thus potentially leading to changes in belief about literacy, learning, and themselves as learners.

Educators can help shape and expand learners' beliefs about their own literary practices, but they can also hinder them. Lytle (1991) notes that while researchers and teacher-researchers play an important role in fostering changes in students' beliefs, they must fulfill that role appropriately, especially if conflicting beliefs about literacy occur. If these conflicts arise, it is the responsibility of the educator to notice and articulate these differences and use them as an impetus for learning and development (Lytle, 1991).

Within the context of incarceration and correctional education, teachers can help students shift their perspective of what literacy is. Students may not see the literacy practices they engage in—such as letter writing—as being valuable literacy events or opportunities for learning, but educators can support students in developing more critical perspectives of literacy and its uses and effects as well as learning itself (Lytle, 1991). This expansion of beliefs can manifest in changes to learners' plans, processes, and patterns of literacy practices in their daily lives.

### ***Practices***

The second dimension of adult literacy development is *practices*, the different types of literacy activities that occur and are used in learners' everyday lives (Lytle, 1991). Lytle (1991) cites Reder's (1987) research on the sociocultural context of adult literacy development, noting how a change in an individual's environment influences their literacy use and development. In studying multiple settings outside the context of formal education, Reder found that individuals naturally acquire literacy skills in response to needs in their lives (Lytle, 1991). Adult learners live in dynamic environments, and much of their literacy development occurs outside of classroom and program-based instruction; letter writing during incarceration is one of these outside practices. Adults enter the classroom with their own learning and literacy practices, some of which are culturally, contextually, or simply new to educators and practitioner-researchers.

Because of their own previous schooling experiences, the experiences of their children, and the ways in which adult education programs resemble traditional schools, adult learners often distinguish between in-school and out-of-school literacy (Lytle, 1991). School instruction, curriculum, and assignments are too often disconnected from learning and practices that occur in daily life, reinforcing the separation between literacy practices that occur inside and outside of the classroom. As a result, adult literacy programs fail to appropriately prepare adults for work or activities outside of the classroom. When adult education programs expand the definition of literacy to include the “activities and practices that are integrated into the fabric of daily life, the social context becomes a rich resource that can inform rather than impede learning” (Auerback, 1989, p. 166 as cited in Lytle, 1991). Correctional education programs cannot ignore the social context of corrections; a better understanding of the literacy practices integrated into the daily lives of incarcerated students, such as letters, inform programs to better support the development of their students.

### ***Processes***

The third dimension of adult literacy development focuses on the *processes* of oral and written language, or the ways in which adult learners manage literacy tasks and the products that they produce (Lytle, 1991). While practices refer to the broader range of literacy activities that learners utilize in their lives, processes are the more specific, moment-to-moment interactions and transactions learners have with their own and others’ texts. This dimension “highlights readers’ and writers’ behaviors immediately before, during, and after reading and writing, and how these behaviors reflect adults’ beliefs” (Lytle, 1991, p. 127). Both beliefs and practices inform processes, and processes may vary in relation to texts, contexts, purposes, and tasks

(Lytle, 1991). Lytle recommends protocols and interviews to document adult learners' literacy processes in order to make them visible for both researchers and learners.

### ***Plans***

The fourth and final dimension, *plans*, refers to what adult students themselves want to learn and how they will go about making that happen within their learning environment and context (Lytle, 1991). Student goals are often unaligned with program and institutional goals (Beder & Valentine, 1987; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1985; Hikes, 1988), leading to complicated learning experiences for students, teachers, and others in the educational process (Lytle, 1991). This holds true for incarcerated students who find it difficult to relate and apply what they study in school to their day-to-day lives (Patterson, 2018). Adult students who return to basic and secondary education programs generally do so with specific goals in mind: to take control and ownership of their own learning, to deal with their own children's schooling and literacy, to improve economic opportunities through new jobs or promotions, to assume new roles and responsibilities at home or work, or to learn more about a particular subject (Lytle, 1991). Incarcerated students mirror these goals within their learning context (Patterson, 2018; Rampey et al., 2016). Ultimately, for adult learners, choice and control are critical to their learning (Lytle, 1991).

### **Literacy as a Social Practice**

A sociocultural approach to literacy serves as a second foundational theoretical frame for this study, with a specific focus on *literacy as a social practice*. The groundwork for the overarching sociocultural perspective of literacy originated in adult, family, and community research and focuses on

...the ways in which people use literacy in their everyday lives, finding ways to make literacy instruction relevant by recognizing and incorporating students' out-of-school ways of practicing literacy, and decreasing achievement gaps for students whose families and communities practice literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or positions of power (Perry, 2012, p.50).

Noting that there is not a singular sociocultural theory on literacy, Perry (2012) divides the paradigm into three major theoretical perspectives: *literacy as social practice*, *multiliteracies*, and *critical literacy*. While these three perspectives overlap in varying degrees, this study is built on the theory of *literacy as social practice*. Theorists of this perspective would describe literacy as “what people *do* with reading, writing, and texts in real world contexts and why they do it” (Perry, 2012, p. 54). Street’s (1985) work with adult learners in Iran strongly influenced this theory through distinguishing *autonomous* and *ideological* literacy models (Perry, 2012). The autonomous model views literacy as a set of technical, decontextualized skills that “literate” individuals possess and “illiterate” individuals do not; the ideological model, in contrast, views literacy as a set of practices, not skills, which are linked to specific contexts. I suggest that literacy as a social practice, through this ideological model that focuses on practices, is an asset-based approach to literacy that recognizes “cognitive skills...are only one part of what it takes to be literate” (Perry, 2012, p. 57).

Though the theory of literacy as a social practice may not describe how individuals learn to read and write, it is useful in exploring the types of knowledge that are required to engage in various literacy practices (Perry, 2012). Sociocultural perspectives are based on the premise that language and literacy are shaped by cultural contexts (Perry, 2012) and are “fully attached...to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and

attitudes, as well as things and places in the world” (Gee, 1996, p. vii). Jails and prisons are unique contexts where all of these aspects exist at extremes, creating unique opportunities for literacy practices and events to be explored. Barton and Hamilton (2000) developed six key tenets regarding the nature of literacy that relate directly to conceptual framework of this study and the context of corrections:

1. Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts
2. There are different literacies associated with different domains of life
3. Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others
4. Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices
5. Literacy is historically situated
6. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense-making. (p.8)

Lytle’s (1991) living literacy and literacy as a social practice complement and share similar tenets, and both function as cornerstones of this study’s conceptual framework.

### **Funds of Knowledge**

Adult learners bring their depth of lived experiences and various types of learning with them into the classroom, all of which add to one’s funds of knowledge—the skills, knowledge, and resources belonging to and embedded in students and their families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Originating in Tucson, these initial researchers sought to counteract deficit-oriented attitudes towards low-income immigrant students and communities and to identify

practices that support the learning experiences of a diverse student population (Ibanez, 2013; Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2018).

Funds of knowledge as a theory is grounded in the idea that one's life experiences are inseparable from one's life conditions (Rodriguez-Arocho, 2020); I argue that the life condition of incarceration functions as a source of new funds of knowledge. Building off of Zipin's (2009) exploration of "dark" or difficult funds of knowledge, and of Huerta and Rios-Aguilar's (2021) funds of *gang* knowledge, I view students' funds of *carceral* knowledge as an asset and something to be embraced in the classroom. Incarcerated individuals, whether enrolled in educational programs or not, utilize and develop various funds of knowledge to survive the total institution that is corrections. I believe letter writing to be a part of that knowledge; the skills, knowledge, style, and written and unwritten rules of personal correspondence are primarily learned during incarceration. Teachers can embrace this component of their students' funds of *carceral* knowledge, focusing on what students bring with them into the learning experience and working together with those students to co-construct the learning process (Larotta and Serrano, 2011).

Learners in adult basic education programs are often viewed as deficient, and majoritarian stories perpetuating that view can negatively impact the educational opportunities that are provided to them (Pickard, 2022). Funds of knowledge push back against these narratives by highlighting the cultural and individual strengths and experiences of communities of color. Culturally relevant educational research and practices, such as funds of knowledge, are vital to adult education, but research is lacking on their application in nontraditional and nonformal learning settings (French, 2019). Issues of social justice and equity are deeply embedded in literacy work (Lytle, 1991); as such, this study uses funds of knowledge as a



theoretical framework as it applies to correctional education, valuing incarcerated students' knowledge and experiences prior to their incarceration as well as the funds gained while inside.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

Providing adult learners with authentic and contextualized opportunities for learning is an effective pedagogical practice for increasing skills, motivation, and persistence in their literacy development (Nielsen, 2015; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002; Street, 2005). In order for correctional educators to bring these learning experiences into the classroom, they must first understand what is considered authentic and relevant for their incarcerated students. The handwritten personal letter—in its multiple forms—is a primary form of communication in correctional facilities and provides a contextually and culturally relevant medium through which educators can support the literacy development of incarcerated students. By listening to and learning from these incarcerated students, correctional educational programs can build upon their students' existing practice of this craft to improve literacy development both in and out of classroom environments. While quantitative data exists showing the frequency and prevalence of letter-writing during incarceration (Cai et al., 2019; Rampey et al., 2016), this study explored the letter-writing practices of incarcerated students through their own experiences and development.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do incarcerated adult students experience their letter-writing practice?
  - a. What role does letter writing play in their lives?
  - b. How do they describe their composition process?
  - c. How do they view themselves as writers?
2. What do students' descriptions of a self-selected letter, as well as the letter itself, indicate about the understandings, processes, and assets they bring to letter writing?

## Research Design and Rationale

This qualitative phenomenological study explored individual's experiences with a particular phenomenon—letter writing—as described by the participants themselves (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A phenomenological design provided an opportunity for participants to consciously experience and explain the “everyday life and social action” of letter writing (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Schram, 2003, p. 71). The research questions explored participants' perceptions of themselves as writers and their composition processes and practices to better understand the role letter writing plays in their lives during their incarceration. The methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews and document analysis—participants' letters—to understand the phenomenon of letter writing. The study was purposefully designed to give voice to an oftentimes silenced and forgotten population through interviews; letters as documents aided in this goal by providing participants an additional means through which they were able to share their voices, views, and experiences, challenging power inequalities that often exist within the research process (Bosworth et al., 2005; Vannier, 2020).

Because this study was interested in the perceptions of the student letter writers themselves, a qualitative phenomenological design was best suited. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that research that is concerned with insight and understanding is more likely to make a difference in the lives of participants when it includes the perspectives of those being studied, and the methods utilized in this research project were designed to capture the unique perspectives and experiences of these individuals. While a quantitative approach, such as a survey, may have reached a larger sample, it would have failed to capture the depth and individualized experiences of research participants. Quantitative measures also risk reducing participants to numbers and statistics, an already existing designation and stigma that incarcerated individuals continually

challenge. Utilizing qualitative measures in this study provides a holistic picture of not only letter writing in correctional facilities but also the individual participants.

## **Methods**

### **Site and Sample Selection**

For this study, I selected a large, urban jail that provides educational programs to its incarcerated population. The site selected for this study was Los Angeles Men's Jail (LAMJ) (pseudonym), one of the three men's correctional compounds within the Los Angeles County jail system. There are currently 13,665 incarcerated men and women in the Los Angeles County jail system, with 3,926 incarcerated at LAMJ (Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, 2023). The Los Angeles County jail system is the largest and arguably most infamous in the nation (*Care First L.A.: Tracking Jail Decarceration*, 2022). Depth is the goal of this study, and exploring the experiences of letter writing for incarcerated individuals within the Los Angeles County jail system, with its scale, uniqueness, and notoriety, should be of interest to future audiences.

### **Access and Recruitment**

As a correctional educator working in the Los Angeles County jails, I already possessed non-escort clearance provided by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department (LASD), as well as thorough background checks by the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation. To conduct research with this population, I worked closely with UCLA's Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP), LASD's Inmate Services administration, and the education unit to ensure proper access.

Because the study is interested in the letter-writing practices of incarcerated individuals with less than a high school diploma, the participants in this study were currently enrolled or recently graduated students from the high school diploma program offered by LASD and a local

charter school. At the time of this study, education services were offered to four units within LAMJ; due to one unit's restricted classification, only students from three of the four units were available as potential participants. Enrolled students in these units ranged from 18 years old to over 60 years old and represented a diversity of ethnicities, races, neighborhoods, and educational levels of attainment.

Recruitment letters were provided to 59 students and classroom teaching assistants across two teaching rotations. Of these, 46 indicated that they were interested in participating in this study, agreeing to be interviewed as well as providing a sample letter they had recently composed. The selected participants were roughly representative of the racial demographics of LAMJ. At the time of recruitment in February 2024, 54% of the population at LAMJ identified as Hispanic, 29% as Black, and 12% as White (*Care First L.A.: Tracking Jail Decarceration*, 2024). The racial breakdown of the participants in this study is 58% Hispanic, 33% Black, and 8% White. All but one of the twelve participants were actively enrolled in the high school diploma program; one recently graduated from the same program within the past year. Below are the pseudonyms of the 12 individuals who participated in this study, their approximate age, their self-identified race/ethnicity, and a brief profile of their educational, carceral, and letter-writing experiences.

## **Participants**

### ***Joel (early 20s, Mexican American)***

Joel, the youngest participant in the study, had no experience with letter writing prior to his incarceration. Born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, Joel's high school education was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and later being shot, leading to his dropping out of school. Incarcerated in Los Angeles County for two years, Joel picked up letter writing after

losing phone and visit privileges in the hole. The letter Joel provided, written to this girlfriend, and his interview provide insight into the experience of an individual brand new to letter writing as a medium of communication. His full letter can be found in Appendix A.

***Ulysses (early 40s, Mexican American)***

Ulysses was selected as he is representative of the “older” generation of incarcerated individuals for whom letter writing was and is an integral part of the incarcerated experience. Born and raised “on the outskirts of Los Angeles,” Ulysses has been incarcerated for the past 26 years. Ulysses has no experience with text messaging or social media; letters have been the only type of written communication he has practiced since being incarcerated at the age of 16. Ulysses also spent roughly 16 years in solitary confinement, where letters were his only means of contact with the outside world. His interview and the letter he provided, written to his niece, provide insight into the experience of seasoned letter writers who have developed their process and perspective over a long carceral sentence. His full letter can be found in Appendix B.

***Roberto (early 40s, Hispanic)***

Roberto is the only participant not originally from Los Angeles; he was born in New Jersey and grew up in the Bronx before coming to live with his mother in Hollywood around the age of 10. A good student as a child, Roberto dropped out of high school in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. He has been incarcerated off and on for the past 24 years, including his current stint at LAMJ beginning in 2021. Since 1999, he and his wife have been writing letters to one another when one or both have been incarcerated. Roberto’s letter and interview are representative of a letter writer who has maintained extended communication with another individual while incarcerated and one who relies on letters and letter writing to communicate complicated emotions and content. His full letter can be found in Appendix C.

***Freddy (mid 30s, Mexican American)***

Down from prison to fight his sentencing, Freddy has been at LAMJ since 2018; overall he has been incarcerated for 12 years. He was born and raised in the neighborhood of Boyle Heights, dropping out of high school in the 9th grade. He worked with his family selling animals at swap meets before being incarcerated as a juvenile and then as an adult. While in prison, Freddy bought himself a typewriter and created vocabulary flashcards to improve his writing skills to help fight his case. The letter he provided for this study was written to his wife, the only person he writes to regularly. In fact, Freddy met his wife through letters; he was given her address and information from a former cellmate, and their relationship began as pen pals. After writing to one another for years, their relationship became romantic; they married in 2023. Freddy's interview and letter are representative of the development of writing skills through self-motivated practice and the power of letters. His full letter can be found in Appendix D.

***Edgar (late 30s, Mexican American)***

Edgar was born and raised in Highland Park, a fast-changing neighborhood that he learns about from his old friends who still live there. As a young student, Edgar was placed in an alternative school due to disciplinary reasons; once he showed strong athletic skills on the football field, he said, he was allowed back to play for his neighborhood high school. First arrested at 12, Edgar has been incarcerated for about 20 years total throughout his life. He has been writing letters since his time in the juvenile camps, and he continues this practice with his daughter and son; the letter he provided is written to an old friend from Highland Park. His full letter can be found in Appendix E.

***David (early 20s, African American)***

This is David's first time in jail. Growing up in Inglewood before moving to Atlanta, GA, David dropped out of school around the age of 14 to work in his family's business and has traveled extensively with them. Before jail, David had never written a letter; as one of the youngest participants, he has singularly communicated with others through digital means. After learning how to properly address an envelope, David quickly picked up the practice; he is highly aware of how to present different selves in his writing, noting that he writes differently to his grandfather, the most educated in his family, compared to his father, who is less educated than David is. David's interview and letter represent an individual experiencing incarceration and letter writing for the first time at the same time. His full letter can be found in Appendix F.

***Tyree (early 30s, Black)***

Tyree was born in Los Angeles but raised all over California; he is an artist who is skilled in poetry, drawing, and handwriting, and his unique letter-writing process and the final letters contain multiple artistic elements. Tyree made it to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade before being kicked out due to excessive absences; the two-hour commute across the city did not help. He wants to complete his high school diploma so that he will not be another "statistic" and hopes to go to college one day to pursue his creative passions. The letters and poems he provided for this study, written to his ex-girlfriend, offer a unique perspective into the visual and literary possibilities of letters, blending multiple artistic forms and providing insight into the intricate, creative processes and products of letter writing. His full letter can be found in Appendix G.

***Josue (early 40s, Mexican American)***

Josue was born in East Los Angeles and raised in Baldwin Park. While he made it to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Josue described his schooling experience as "a lot of fighting" and expressed regret



over not discovering his passion for writing until later in life. He has been at LAMJ for five years but has been incarcerated consistently since 1999; he said he averages about six months on the streets before he returns to jail yet again. He enrolled in school to motivate his daughter to stay in school, telling her, “If Dad can do it from in here, you can do it from out there.” Josue is a prolific letter writer who provided the title for this dissertation, “A Present from the Inside.” His full letter can be found in Appendix H.

***Richard (mid 50s, White)***

As the oldest participant, Richard provides a unique perspective as an individual with previous letter-writing experience in the free world who has returned to the practice due to his incarceration. Richard was born and raised in Los Angeles, but he has spent much of his adult life living and working across the country. He described himself as a “welfare baby” for whom school was “basically a place to get lunch;” he dropped out after the ninth grade. In his job as a safety manager, Richard wrote reports by hand frequently, but he was always embarrassed by them due to his lack of literacy skills. Like Josue, he enrolled in school as a challenge to and motivation for his son to complete his high school diploma as well. His interview and the letter provided, written to his son, offer a detailed insight into the experiences of older incarcerated students with rich life and work histories and how letter writing and literacy development affect both. His full letter can be found in Appendix I.

***Mario (mid 40s, Hispanic)***

Mario was born and raised in southeast Los Angeles and, like Richard, primarily attended school to get lunch; he dropped out in the eighth grade, having never learned to read and write. Mario enrolled in school at LAMJ to improve his basic skills; despite his lower literacy levels, Mario is a prolific letter writer, and being able to communicate through letters while incarcerated

was the motivating factor for him to learn how to read and write. The letter Mario provided, written to a friend, and his own reading and analysis of it during our interview offers a unique perspective into the letter writing process. Mario provides insight into the experience of an individual actively working to improve their literacy skills through letter writing. His full letter can be found in Appendix J.

***Derrick (early 30s, Black)***

Derrick has previously been incarcerated but has only now started to write letters. He was proudly born and raised in the Crenshaw district, and after attending a “shitty school at first in Westchester,” he transferred to a Blue Ribbon School that had a positive impact on his education. During his previous stint in prison, Derrick solely relied on phone calls and an email-like system on a tablet to communicate with others. Since coming back to jail, Derrick writes letters regularly out of necessity, but only does so to one person. His interview and the letter provided, written to his girlfriend, offer a detailed exploration of the letter-writing strategies and perspectives learned while incarcerated, giving insight into the experiences of someone who brings previous incarceration history and knowledge into their current letter-writing practice. His full letter can be found in Appendix K.

***Lamont (early 20s, Black)***

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Lamont had been at LAMJ for only six months at the time of our interview; this is his first time incarcerated. Despite dropping out in the second or third grade, Lamont developed his reading and writing from “home training” as he called it, observing his family and reading old magazines around the house. Before jail, the only letter Lamont had written was as a 10-year-old to then-President Barack Obama; he (or someone) replied, but Lamont lost the letter over the years. Like the other young participants, most of

Lamont's writing experience comes from texting and social media, and his interview and letter offer a unique perspective of someone experiencing jail and letter writing for the first time. His full letter can be found in Appendix L.

### **Data Collection**

In order to explore the personal experiences of letter-writing, the primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Because students enrolled in adult basic education and adult secondary education (ABE/ASE) classes have a wide range of academic experiences, it was important to conduct interviews with learners across a spectrum of skills to understand the role and practice of letter writing in their lives regardless of literacy level. Lytle's (1991) conceptual framework of adult literacy development served as a guide for the semi-structured interview protocol with questions addressing four dimensions: beliefs, practices, processes, and plans. Lytle recommends interviews as a data collection method, as "documenting adults' reading and writing through protocols and interviews makes literacy processes visible and accessible for discussion and analysis, not only for researchers but also for learners" (p.128). The interview questions were developed to better understand students' individual letter-writing practices, their writing process, and the value that letters have for them and were purposefully designed to establish rapport with participants, providing them the opportunity to speak openly about their letter-writing experiences.

During the interview, participants provided at least one letter that they were comfortable sharing and discussing. This artifact was used to further explore the participants' relationship to and process of letter writing through their own explication. Specific questions regarding their letter can be found in Appendix XX. Participants shared their individual processes with their chosen letter's composition: to whom was it written, was it in reply to a received letter or sent

unprompted, how long did it take to compose, how did they personalize it, did they ask for or receive help while writing, how many drafts were created, what information was shared, etc. In addition to this process and practice analysis, participants were prompted to discuss how they value letters and letter writing: what does this letter mean to them, what does this letter say about them as a person, what is their connection or relationship with the recipient, what is the value of that relationship, how effectively did they communicate, what are their goals or hopes with this letter, how did they feel during its composition, etc. The explication and exploration of these artifacts by the student writers themselves provided rich, unique data; by having the writers themselves describe all elements of the letter, including their pre-writing process, the composition itself, and the post-writing process, this data gave insight into the existing and developing literacy practices of incarcerated writers, supporting an asset-based approach that recognized their experiences and multiple funds of knowledge.

I conducted the interviews in four separate locations within LAMJ from February 29, 2024, through March 21, 2024. Each of these locations functioned as classrooms for the education program, though only three would properly be described as one; the fourth was a converted mess hall broken into separate learning areas. Los Angeles Sheriff's Department deputies and correctional officers escorted the participants to the interview locations before leaving the interviewee and myself alone to conduct the interview. The three classrooms had closed doors for privacy but a wall of windows for security; the escorting officers could see us, but not hear us. The converted mess hall was an open space, but the officers remained in their office nearby and in sight. LASD granted special permission to allow me to use a digital recording device to capture the interviews. Eleven of the twelve interviews took place before the start of the school day, with the earliest morning start time beginning at 6:43 am and the latest at

7:13 am; the single afternoon interview took place at 2:49 pm. The shortest interview—the very first one—was 25:01 minutes; the longest was 53:51 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to confidentiality and privacy concerns, I transcribed each of the interviews myself. This process was tedious, but it provided me with an opportunity to immerse myself in the data. I listened to each interview extensively and repeatedly, completing each interview's transcription within a week from when the interview took place.

As Lytle's (1991) framework of adult literacy development functioned as a guide for the interview protocol, it was also used for deductive data analysis. Interviews were initially coded using the four dimensions of beliefs, practices, processes, and plans. While the interview protocol was developed according to these dimensions, they also overlap frequently. Participant responses will likely be interwoven as well, so I will be looking for themes related to student beliefs about themselves as writers, the role letter writing plays in their lives, their practices and processes of composition, and the effect that both incarceration and school enrollment has had on their literacy development.

Themes connected to *beliefs* related to participants' own evolving theories about writing, language, and learning (Lytle, 1991), and ultimately their own perceptions of themselves as writers. Belief themes included responses that discussed their current writing skills and abilities, previous schooling and educational experiences, or developing identity as a student or writer. Themes associated with *practices* referred to the letter-writing activities that occur in participants' everyday lives (Lytle, 1991) and were found in responses that discussed frequency, location, duration, and conditions of letter writing. *Processes* explored the moment-to-moment behaviors of composition (Lytle, 1991), and themes analyzed in this dimension discussed the

intricacies of the writing process, including the content of the letters, the writer's voice, the intended recipient, proofreading, drafts, and any assistance. The final dimension used in analysis was *plans*, the intentions that participants have for their literacy development (Lytle, 1991). Themes about plans were tied to responses that discussed future goals for literacy skills, letters, and areas in which they may wish to improve, including grammar, spelling, storytelling, handwriting, organization, voice, and style.

### **Positionality**

Regarding the management of my role, I positioned myself as a teacher practitioner and a doctoral researcher from UCLA. As a correctional educator within the Los Angeles County jail system, students and participants at LAMJ were aware of who I am, my role, my organization, and my affiliation with the sheriff's department. With this specific population, familiarity is a benefit; incarcerated students are often suspicious of outside educators and their intentions. Positioning myself as a teacher with years of experience working in this setting and with these students provides a foundation of trust.

My role as a doctoral student was new to many of those who knew me, as I rarely, if ever, disclose personal information. This disclosure, however, encouraged support and participation. I let the participants know that the subject of the study is informed and inspired by interactions and reciprocal learning from students in my own classrooms. I informed them that my goal with this study was to learn more from them as individuals, as well as celebrate and pay respect to the art, culture, and power of letter writing. I also informed them that their engagement in this research may lead to potential changes in teaching methods and curriculum within correctional education.

## **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

My own bias is a potential threat to the credibility of my study. This topic is borne out of my respect and admiration of the letter-writing practices of my students, and my encouragement of this literacy skill is evident in all of my classes and interactions with students. Personal and professional reflections on letter writing have shaped my teaching practice and curriculum development, and my role in the classroom often expands beyond instructor to that of editor and advisor. My role in this study, however, was that of researcher. While I am aware of students' letter-writing practices as a teacher, I used this opportunity to understand this phenomenon as thoroughly as possible without bias impacting the data collection or analysis. In order to do so, the semi-structured interviews used a consistent interview protocol that was developed through practice and feedback. Interviews and document analysis helped triangulate the data, and standardized protocols will ensure unbiased document and interview analysis.

Participant reactivity is another potential threat. Participants were familiar with my name or face and may have felt pressured to be a part of the study for multiple reasons: They may have felt that participating in the study was a requirement, that their grade depended on it, that they would gain favor with the school or the sheriff's department, or that they might be doing me a favor and expecting one in return. Some may have provided responses that they thought were "right" but may not be true to their experience. Since the study was focused on their own experiences, practices, and beliefs about writing, some participants may have been hesitant to reveal personal and potentially vulnerable information about themselves. Some may have also been fearful that their identities or those of their loved ones might be exposed.

Since this study was focused on writing rather than reading letters, the only documents to be analyzed are compositions created by the students themselves. Reactivity was a concern here

as well, but incarcerated individuals already write their letters with a third audience in mind: the sheriff's department. Any mail that comes into or out of the jail is subject to be searched by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department; as such, participants knowingly composed their letters with this possibility in mind. Regardless of this threat to their own writing and privacy, students continue to use letters as a deeply personal form of communication. Participants were cognizant that an additional audience—me as a researcher—would be reading, recording, and making copies of their letters, but given the already existing awareness of an outside audience, I believe that the threat of participant reactivity in both the interviews and collected documents was minimal.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As incarcerated individuals are a protected class, many ethical issues were considered in this study. I worked closely with IRB and LASD to ensure that all responsible precautions are taken when including incarcerated individuals as part of the research process.

Jails themselves are different from prisons; the majority of detained individuals in jails have yet to be sentenced, meaning they have open and active cases. Because of this, personal information cannot be shared in any way, and this study protected that information by providing aliases for interviewees and editing any responses that may be personally identifying. Additionally, any documents included for analysis and in the appendices has had personal information removed. Within prison research, minimizing the risk of harm by concealing identifying information is crucial to ensure confidentiality and anonymity (Bachman and Schuut, 2016; Vannier, 2020).

To eliminate issues of vulnerability and coercion, I assured students that participation is completely voluntary and confidential. No interview responses or documents were shared with



other students, teachers, or sheriff's department staff. They were informed that participation had no bearing on their standing within the school or facility; they would neither be punished nor rewarded for participating in the study. I let them know that their honest and candid responses in this study will potentially shape the type of education, curriculum, and teaching methods within the correctional education programs in the Los Angeles County jails and beyond.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter reports the findings of a qualitative research study that focuses on the letter-writing experiences and practices of 12 incarcerated adult students enrolled in a high school diploma program at Los Angeles Men’s Jail (LAMJ). The interview data was collected between February 28 and March 21, 2024, and explored how these 12 individuals described the value of letters and the role that letter writing plays in their lives, their individual practices and processes, and their beliefs about themselves as writers. In addition to interviews, all participants provided a handwritten letter for a self-guided document analysis in which they described their composition process.

I sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do incarcerated adult students experience their letter-writing practice?
  1. What role does letter writing play in their lives?
  2. How do they describe their composition process?
  3. How do they view themselves as writers?
2. What do students’ descriptions of a self-selected letter and the letter itself indicate about the understandings, processes, and assets they bring to letter writing?

#### **Summary of Findings**

Six main findings answering these research questions emerged from my data analysis. First, participants describe letters and their letter-writing experience as a form of communication necessitated and shaped by their carceral experience. Second, on a personal level, letter writing uniquely allows participants to express their true selves and make sense of their experiences. Third, and relatedly, corresponding through letters provides participants the opportunity to say

the unsaid and be heard in ways distinct from other modes of communication. Fourth, participants consider the letters they write as gifts and use multiple strategies to personalize their compositions for their recipients. Fifth, given such attention and effort, participants utilize the classroom, its resources, and their peers to support their letter-writing process. Sixth, participants self-report improving their writing skills over time and show a determination to learn through their letter writing.

While these findings often answer multiple research questions at once and are discussed under themes, they are organized to roughly follow the structure of the Research Questions. RQ1a is answered in the first four findings; RQ1b is answered in findings two, four, and five; and RQc is answered in the first and sixth findings. Just as the letters themselves functioned as touchstones during the interview process, RQ2, in some manner, is answered and addressed in each of the six findings.

**Finding One: Participants describe letters and their letter-writing experience as a form of communication necessitated and shaped by their carceral experience.**

Participants' experiences with hand-written letters are directly related to their incarceration or the carceral system, and participants recognized the necessity of writing letters while incarcerated. At times, communicating with the outside world is only possible through letters, emphasizing how vital letters and writing skills are to their experience in jail.

**“You guys text; I write. It just comes with the lifestyle.”**

Participants recognized that letter writing is a cultural and contextual practice embedded within the carceral experience, even in 2024. As Edgar succinctly stated, “All letter writing had to do with me coming to jail.” His statement, echoed by others, pointed out that participants' letter-writing experiences are tied to their carceral experiences. All participants had little to no

experience writing letters at any point in their lives prior to their incarceration but have taken up the practice now, oftentimes out of necessity; communication through phone calls and in-person visits can be restricted for disciplinary reasons, but letters are always permitted, even in solitary confinement or “the hole”. Before coming to jail, the majority of participants solely relied on text messaging, email, and social media for any written communication; only one participant, Ulysses, who has been incarcerated since the late 1990s, has never used those devices or platforms in the free world. On the streets, especially for the younger participants, letter writing is virtually nonexistent “unless you're sending out mail on some government stuff,” in Joel’s mind, “but I don't do that cause I was a kid out there.” Joel’s previous understanding of letters was that they are formal modes of communication practiced by adults; this belief has since changed due to his own experience and growing practice of letter writing while incarcerated.

Those who did have previous letter-writing experience only wrote sparingly and for specific audiences. Roberto, who has consistently written letters during his 20-plus years of incarceration, was the only participant who wrote handwritten letters with regularity when he was last on the outside; even then, it was a special event saved for communicating with his father before he passed. For Lamont, the only letter he had written in his life was as a 10-year-old to then-President Barack Obama: “That was just on some personal stuff...Black president sounded cool.” Lamont got a reply—though he’s “pretty sure [President Obama] didn’t write it”—but he ended up losing the response letter. For a student who dropped out of school in the “2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade,” writing a letter to the President of the United States was no small task. This type of letter writing, however, is more of a novelty, not something meant for consistent communication. For that, Lamont used “Facetime, Instagram, Snapchat.” When I asked him about his writing practices on the streets, Lamont’s only experience was through text messaging. Reflecting on

what he considered “writing” as opposed to “texting,” Lamont said, “I would send my ex-girlfriend paragraphs before she woke up. That’s about it.” This type of text writing—if only in length—was the closest Lamont came to composing letters.

Joel, like Lamont, only communicated through his phone and social media apps prior to his incarceration. “I never wrote a letter before I came to jail, but I texted a lot,” he said. He recounted that the only experience he may have had with letters was in the classroom. “If I ever did a letter, it’d be like for a school project,” he said, later stating, “Out there, you don’t really use paper. You just use the phone, so you don’t really need to.” Joel’s contrasting of not needing to write letters “out there” implies that there is the need to do so *in here*. In his own descriptions of his letter-writing experience, Joel juxtaposes contexts: school versus personal use, kid versus adult, out there versus in here. Before his incarceration, he fell into the former categories; now, he views himself in the latter.

Derrick similarly contrasts his letter-writing experience with pre- and post-incarceration. Of his previous relationship with letters, Derrick said

Never wrote a letter on the streets. It’s hard. It’s kinda crazy that it hasn’t—like, if you think back 30 years ago when I was born or close to the time when I was born, that’s all they did, you know? Like, they wrote letters and shit. Yeah, it’s kinda crazy when you think about that. But yeah, I haven’t wrote any letters on the street at all, ever.

Derrick was realizing in the moment how context-dependent his current letter-writing practice is. He only recently began writing letters with regularity; though Derrick previously spent time in a few state prisons, he only composed one letter, written to his sister, early in his sentence before he was transferred “to a yard where you could use phones and shit—so I stopped writing.” While in prison, he relied on the phone and JPay, a company contracted with the State of

California’s prison system that provides an email service that is available on tablets. “In prison, it's different...they got some shit that's called JPay letters, so it's like instant, like a text.” This type of communication mirrored the type of writing he was used to on the streets, where he primarily used “text and social media” as well as writing reports for work with “some program that they use similar to email.” It took Derrick returning to jail—where the county does not provide tablets for communication—for him to begin his letter-writing practice.

Like Derrick, one of the oldest participants, Richard, reflected on the change in communication in the free world over time. Describing his experience with letters before his incarceration, Richard said, “You know, just like everybody else, right around 2002 or '03, the world changed, you know. Letters and things of that nature just stopped happening. So, for the last 20 years, everything has been electronic.” Richard’s own writing practices followed this societal shift, but while handwritten letters as a primary form of communication “stopped happening” for Richard, he did note that letter writing was still relevant in one of his relationships in the past 20 years: “I had a friend of mine go to jail. When he first went to jail, I wrote him one or two letters.” That communication was short-lived, though, after those first letters. “He went to jail for 10 years, and I never wrote him again. It's hard to write, you know,” he told me with what sounded like guilt in his voice. Richard’s recollection shows the fragility of communicating through letters, where both parties must participate as correspondents, even when “it's hard to take time and write.” Derrick broke down the challenges that letter writing presents for loved ones on the outside and the experience of the incarcerated letter writer inside:

Letters mean a lot, bro. Letters mean a lot. Some n\*\*\*\*s get mad when they not getting letters, some n\*\*\*\*s get mad when they write letters and they don't get nothing back.

Like, you know? But, shit, life don't stop out there, bro. It's hard—it’s really hard to write

a letter, feel me. It's not easy. I don't know. N\*\*\*\*s be expecting a bitch to just write them a letter, n\*\*\*\*, and that shit not easy, you feel me.

Derrick points out a difficult truth: “life don’t stop out there.” In jail, there is time and a need to sit down and write; on the streets, people have instant access to communication and have to intentionally take the time to write a handwritten letter. That act speaks volumes to their incarcerated recipients; as Roberto quipped, “Someone gave a rat's ass to sit down and write you. It means a lot.” David expounded on that same feeling, saying:

To receive letters, it just lets me know like someone really sat down out of their day and wrote a letter. That’s like kinda different now. Like everything is quick and fast and in a hurry, so it just lets me know like, I still have a lot of support.

These experiences support the finding that, in the digital age, letter writing is still practiced by incarcerated folks and those with ties to them, but not without difficulty and deep value in both contexts.

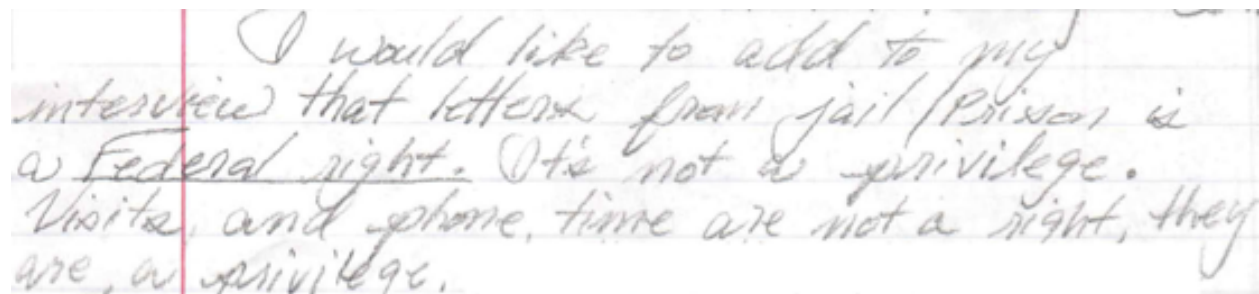
Exposure to the carceral letter writing can happen at a young age. Freddy is one of the few participants who wrote letters with some consistency before his own incarceration, but only because his letters were tied to the correctional system. His father, who is currently incarcerated as well, spent time in and out of prison and other mandated programs throughout Freddy’s childhood.

The first time I actually started writing letters was when I was on the streets because my dad was in a rehab center, so I used to write my dad letters. And I was probably like...around 12, 11 years old. I would write my dad letters. He'll write me back letters, he'll send me drawings, and that's probably the first time I wrote letters.

Freddy's letter writing continued as a youth once he became involved in the juvenile system, and his letter-writing practices developed further during his adult incarceration. Freddy's experience shows that even from a young age, through his own incarceration and that of his father during his youth, letter writing in his life has been linked to carceral culture.

**“I went over a decade without using the phone... The only way I communicated was through letters.”**

Several participants discussed their letter-writing practice beginning and developing because of time spent in either the hole—a single-man, jail-within-jail cell used for discipline purposes—or solitary confinement. In those scenarios, where visits or phone calls are denied, letters are the only way to connect with others. Josue conveyed this reality in a letter he provided after our interview:



I would like to add to my interview that letters from jail/prison is a Federal right. It's not a privilege. Visits and phone time are not a right, they are, a privilege.

Because the privileges of phone calls and in-person visits can be taken away, even more weight is placed on letter writing in these contexts. Joel, who had never written a personal letter to anyone before his incarceration, only began doing so when he was in the hole. Echoing Josue's observation about visits and phone calls being a privilege and letter writing a right, Joel explained, “I couldn't use the phone and I wanted to kinda tell [my girlfriend] how I feel, so I wrote her a letter when I was in the hole. I asked for a paper and a pencil.” Joel wrote his first letter about a year into his incarceration overall and about his “second or third week” in the hole. “I was sick already cause I'm used to using the phone every day, so I wrote her a bunch of



letters,” he said of that experience. For Joel, who was “sick” from the lack of communication, letter writing was initially a salve that developed into a consistent writing practice.

Even as a requisite practice in this context, participants expressed that letter writing feels archaic, a relic of time past, and they describe their writing experience using language that frequently mirrors their struggles with the stark and minimal conditions in which participants live: “The first letter I wrote...was like primitive,” Derrick shared. Echoing that language, Edgar explained that when he first started writing letters, “I had to go back to the fundamentals, and it was like going back to the Stone Age.” This “primitive” mode of communication was made new to participants once they became incarcerated, and Edgar pointed out a cultural and contextual truth for incarcerated individuals: “Even if they don’t wanna, people gotta learn how to write.” With extensive letter-writing experience during his 20 years of incarceration, Edgar knows that letter writing in jail and prison is a necessity. He shared that “if they're young, like, ‘I don't know how to write a letter, I’m gonna call my mom,’” he has had to remind them that neither phone calls nor visits are guaranteed; they can be taken away “if you got in trouble.”

Edgar learned this truth early in his incarceration. On the eve of a visit from his mother, he got into a fight and was sent to “the box,” an interchangeable term used for the hole, the single-man cells used as discipline.

They took us to the box, and all they did was give us paper. And I was like, ‘Hey, I was gonna have a visit,’ and they were like, ‘Nah, you’re not gonna have a visit. You'll get a visit next week.’ And I wrote to my mom...explaining to her what happened.

First arrested at 12-years-old, Edgar has relied primarily on letters to communicate because he has “stayed in trouble” throughout his time spent incarcerated as both a juvenile and adult, limiting his phone use and visitations.

Like Edgar, Ulysses, who has been incarcerated for over 26 years, knows firsthand how essential letter writing is to the carceral experience, and over the course of his time served he has witnessed—and questioned—the introduction of technology into carceral spaces. While there have been benefits—movies, music, classes, and email on tablets—he believes the implementation of and overreliance on technology has had a negative impact on the skills of letter writers.

In prison, now they have tablets, so these guys that are coming in have no real necessity—they don't need to learn how to write because they're handed this tablet. And it's like, well you can continue doing what you were doing when you were out there. And they never, they never have a sense of urgency in terms of learning this [letter writing]. And in their minds, they think there's no real reason.

Recognizing that newly incarcerated individuals “continue doing what [they] were doing out there,” i.e., texting and using technology, Ulysses lamented the decline of writing by hand. Like Edgar, the importance of handwriting, letter writing, and writing skills in general are things that Ulysses tries to pass on to the younger generation.

I do tell these guys it's something that they should learn because you never know, you never know when you may need to write...you might not always have technology. It can be something that can be taken away, it's something that you may not always have.

The sharing of this knowledge comes from Ulysses' lived experience. Of the 26 years he has been incarcerated, Ulysses estimated that “two-thirds of that, give or take” has been spent in the SHU—solitary confinement. “You're held there 24 hours a day within the SHU structure; you don't really have contact with any other people. It's just you and your thoughts,” he shared.

While Ulysses' experience may be extreme compared to that of others, it taught him the value and necessity of being able to communicate through letters. During one stretch in the SHU, Ulysses

...went over a decade without using the phone. So, when I got out...I didn't even have a number to call, I didn't know a number...People didn't even recognize my voice anymore. Cause the only way I communicated was through letters, and sometimes those didn't make it.

With roughly 16 years spent in the barest and most physically and psychologically demanding circumstances, letter writing allowed Ulysses to stay connected with his loved ones, even when doing so seemed pointless and daunting given his lack of skills and experience with writing.

It's hard to stay connected...You really have to make it a priority to stay connected. It really is on us that are in here to stay connected because if you choose not to write, or if I had chosen to never write, the connection would have been broken because there were years where there was no telephone, there was nothing, except those letters. So, had I made that choice and said, 'I'm not gonna learn how to write, I don't care, what does it matter, I have life'...That's a mistake because...what about the people your letters could affect out there? It's important to keep that connection. Because it's really easy to lose it.

For years, letter writing was the only means through which Ulysses maintained relationships with his people. Here, he acknowledges that the responsibility to hold that fragile connection falls on the incarcerated individual "because on the outside, people don't write as much," compared to those on the inside. In stressing the necessity and drive to communicate through writing, Ulysses added, "If you give me a rock and some sand, I can write something." His

primal description of writing—rock, sand, the earth itself—underscores the basic human need for connection, specifically in the context of incarceration.

**Finding Two: Letter writing allows participants to express their true selves and make sense of their experiences.**

In addition to being a necessity, letter writing also led to the benefits of personal growth. When discussing the role that letter writing plays in their lives, participants reported that this mode of communication, in contrast to phone calls and visits, allows them to reveal a more complex and complete version of themselves. Whether transcribing thought to paper in real time or crafting a letter through multiple drafts, participants use letters to make sense of their experience, understand their thoughts and emotions, and share their true selves.

**“That’s the most accurate I can get.”**

Participants shared that letter writing provides them with an opportunity to share their full selves with the recipients of their letters. As Lamont described it, in a context and culture where men often feel they need to be a “tough guy...they can be themselves in a letter instead of being who they are in here.” Lamont’s insight suggests that on the page, through letter writing, men are their real selves, not some role they present to others. He continued, “Outside the pen and the paper...they got a hard body, [but] when they start writing on the letter...they're expressing their self, their feeling, their emotions.” Josue, pointing down to the letter he shared for this study, condensed and echoed Lamont’s statement, simply stating, “That’s the real me.” Edgar reiterated this view, explaining that “when it’s a letter, it’s letter writing, it’s me and my thoughts or my feelings;” for him, “writing—it feels more authentic.” Richard spoke of letter writing as being a medium that breaks down and strips away various identities or false presentations of himself: “When I write a letter, it really is who I am...It’s not a façade, you know. Businessman

or father—whatever—it’s just who I am. There's nothing fake about my letter writing.” Tyree shared, “With the letters, I get to describe what I'm really going through.” His addition of the qualifier “really” suggests that his letters contain the real truth of his experience and of himself in contrast to how he communicates with others through the phone or in person.

### *Understanding the Self*

The act of letter writing provides participants with an exercise to better understand their situation and themselves within that context. As David explained, “When I first came [to jail], you know, it was a lot of different things I could talk about that were new experiences for me. So, it was good to write about those things.” The act of writing gave David “a lot of clarity.” As many of the younger participants, including David, are encountering both incarceration and letter writing for the first time, the act of writing letters becomes a means to make sense of their experiences and environment. Joel, in discussing why letter writing is useful for him, said,

You're putting your thoughts on paper. Cause you know what you're feeling in your head, but you don't really think about it, though, cause it's just there already. So, you put it on paper, and then you read it yourself...you're really peeping the whole thing, you know? The notion of “peeping the whole thing,” seeing the big picture, is Joel’s way of understanding his thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of his new reality. “Sometimes you just gotta put it on paper cause you can’t express how you feel,” he said, recognizing that his internal experience needs to be made external to make sense of it. By doing so, “you can kinda figure it out for yourself.” Josue uses the act of letter writing similarly, noting that he “get[s] more in-depth into [his] feelings” when he is writing, helping him to better understand complicated emotions and experiences.

Roberto shared that “some of the letters, I'll write a letter and I won't send it. I said it.” For him, just putting his thoughts and feelings into words on the page is a worthwhile process. “Even if I don't send it, I voiced it,” he said confidently. Lamont uses letters that he does not send to check in with himself, and he advises others to do the same. “I think everybody should do it...Just write a letter and put it up, read it for later, see if you're that same person. That's what I do.” Not all the letters Lamont has saved are written for others: “I have a letter to myself up there, too. Letter to myself: my past me, my future me, and my present me. I got a lot of letters.” For Lamont, these letters are more of an exercise in understanding who he is and who he hopes to become.

The letter-writing process allows participants to “deeply think,” as Tyree described it, and participants recognized the benefit of writing as thinking. Josue echoed Tyree’s description, contrasting his thought process when speaking versus writing: “When I'm just talking, I'm just talking...But when I'm on the letter, I'm thinking,” he said. Josue further explained that “a lot of people just talk” but often “don't think before we talk—or else I wouldn't be [in jail].” Participants described the benefits of the writing process as allowing them to slow their thought process down, make sense of their thoughts, and communicate with intention. With limited literacy skills and experience, Mario explained how letter writing has been beneficial in his development, saying, “Actually, it helps me, like, to think a lot.” As David, who primarily corresponds through text messaging and social media when on the outs, described it, “When you really sit down and you write a letter and you mail it to someone, it isn't just out of, you know, spontaneous type of thinking. You really had to put a lot of thought into it.” For Derrick, when it comes to letter writing, “it's just kinda easier thinking about what I'm gonna say. It's just kinda easier thinking about, like pondering on the next line.” Participants stated that by eliminating

“spontaneous” thinking, they can engage in a slower, deeper type of thinking that benefits both their approach to writing and communication.

### *Expressing the Self*

Participants viewed their individual letter-writing process as an expression of their authentic selves. Not only are the words on the page representative of oneself, but how the letter is composed serves as an extension of the individual. Most of the participants expressed that they write their letters only once, preferring to “let it be how it is,” as Freddy described it. Josue took pride in any errors he may make, viewing them as his recipient seeing the real him: “It's my own thing. Even when I misspell or whatever, cause I want them to know that's me, you know.” Richard described writing letters as his true voice, whereas communicating through text messaging, with its autocorrect features and word suggestions, makes him “have a bigger voice on the text than I do in person. I would say things in a text that I wouldn't normally say in person.” Joel shared a similar perspective, discussing how texting is less authentic than his letters.

When you text, it fixes everything for you—words, it shows you if a word is wrong—it'll automatically, ‘Is this the word you're looking for?’ ‘Yes.’ You know? Like [letters], you gotta be precise, cause there's no, like, ‘Oh, maybe the word's like this or maybe it looks like this.’

Because of the assistance technology provides, text messages “are not very personal,” as Richard described them, whereas letters are “who I am.”

For Ulysses, crafting a letter through revision almost diminishes the authenticity and specialness of the moment in which the thoughts and feelings were initially transcribed:

Because of the way that I write, I can't really rewrite it. It will never be the same... The second I finish, I fold it up, put it in the envelope...to just send it the way that it is, the way that I thought it. And it's for that reason I can't really rewrite it. Because even though it may be the same message, it may not be the same mood. Or different things may be happening within that time, and it'll change the content of the letter or the feeling of the letter. And to me, that's important. And so, I don't ever rewrite a letter.

Ulysses describes letter writing as “unguarded,” and through his writing process he attempts to capture his authentic self as he is in that moment. Reflecting on the experience of writing the letter he provided for this study, one written to his niece, Ulysses described it as “a moment...where I’m not a prisoner.” The act of letter writing allowed him to rewrite who he was, erasing the role of *inmate* and providing him with the opportunity to just be *uncle*. As Roberto shared, “When you’re writing a personal letter...you’re just being yourself.” This emphasis on letters as representations of one’s true self highlights their value for both the individual and their recipient; even though the letter writer may not be physically present in the lives of their loved ones, letters can function as authentic substitutes.

Other participants write and rewrite their letters over time to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Whereas writing an unrevised letter “in one take,” as Lamont described it, can be representative of one’s authenticity in the moment, participants who write multiple drafts use the process to slow down the writing process and distill themselves on the page. Joel, for instance, develops his letters over the course of a few weeks. While “a lot of people would just write a letter off the top of their head,” Joel pieces his letters together over time.



Usually, day after day I just put my thoughts on the draft and then I revise it and everything and I get the proper grammar and then I really finish writing it. And it takes kind of a while, lowkey.

Working towards a “final product,” as he calls it, affords Joel the opportunity to think deeply over time and construct his thoughts to add different elements to his letters. Over the course of a few days or weeks, he adds “anything else on it, like pictures or like smiley faces or whatever the case may be,” to support his full expression of himself.

Tyree has an iterative and overlapping writing process involving multiple drafts that is arguably the most complex and creative of any of the participants. He provided five different compositions for this study, all written to and for the same recipient—his ex-girlfriend, the mother of his daughter—and explained each composition’s connection and development. The first work he wrote was “Poem Therapy,” which was meant to be the original letter, but he “elaborated on that” to write “Distant Lover,” a poem that distilled the current state of his relationship with his ex-girlfriend. From there, Tyree composed a straight letter that kept the same themes but presented them in a more direct way. This letter, along with an influential discussion in class, inspired two more writings, “Lost” and “Found.” While describing the order of his composition, Tyree physically stacked the pages on top of the other as he spoke, adding an onomatopoeic *boom* after each placement. This unique process and the various creative elements he adds are ultimately strategies he utilizes to work towards a full expression of himself.

When I asked Derrick about his composition process, he described how, instead of rewriting whole letters, he sends out “a bunch of letters” that are, in effect, drafts. “Yeah, I don't ever rewrite. I'm not rewriting, gang. Nah, unless—nah, I'm not rewriting. I'mma just send you a

bunch of letters,” laughing and shaking his head. The letter he provided was one of these early letters: “This is some shit I just wrote real quick, and now my next couple letters is like what I really wanted to say type shit.” Letters are the main type of writing he engages in now, but Derrick also used to write rap lyrics, and throughout our interview, he gave insight into both processes. Echoing the act of writing multiple letters rather than revising one, he used his rap writing process to explain his letter writing process as well as the letter he provided for the study: “When I used to write raps, right, I would write some shit, and then by like the third song, I be like, ‘Okay, this is what I really wanted to say.’ You feel me?” Derrick brings this experience of writing lyrics to writing letters, all with the goal of gathering and refining his thoughts toward a clear expression of himself to another person.

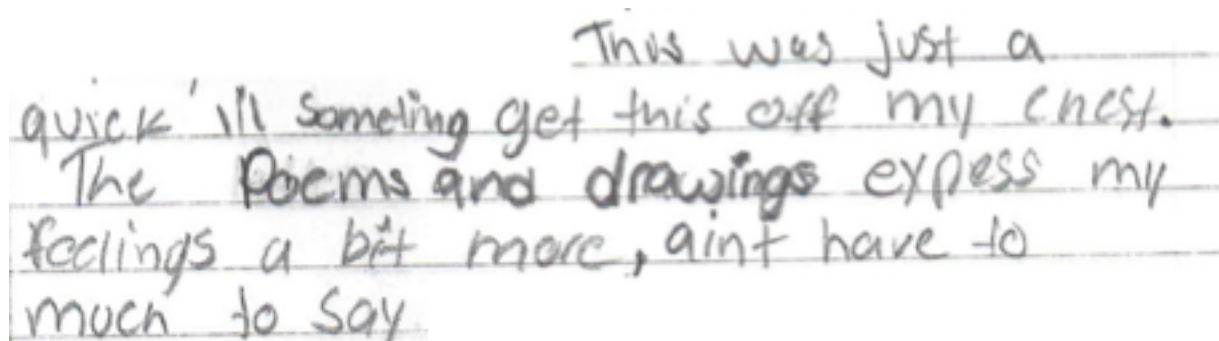
For participants, letter writing is an exercise in working toward the truth, and the product, the letter itself, is a representation of their true self. Through their individual writing processes, participants are able to make sense of their experiences, thoughts, and emotions and express themselves in a way that allows them to be vulnerable with their audience. When you write letters to loved ones, “[You] gotta really open your heart and your mind to them,” Lamont said. Letters, in contrast to phone calls or in-person visits, allow participants to do just that.

**Finding Three: Corresponding through letters provides participants the opportunity to say the unsaid and be heard in ways distinct from other modes of communication.**

Through letter writing, participants are able to discuss difficult topics, thoughts, or feelings that may otherwise remain unbroached in verbal communication, allowing them to experience cathartic benefits through writing. In turn, letters provide participants the opportunity to be heard, especially when other methods of communication are unavailable or ineffective.

**“Not a lot of people share verbally, but on paper? That’s a whole different thing.”**

Throughout the interviews, participants shared that what and how they communicate through writing letters is distinct from phone calls and visits. While phone calls are highly valuable because of their access and frequency, and visits because of the added visual and verbal connection, letters provide opportunities to fill the gaps “in between the stuff we talk about,” as Tyree described it. Letters may literally fill the time in between phone calls, but Tyree’s concept of “in between” also points to what is unsaid in conversation. Letters allow him to “get stuff off my chest if I don’t really wanna open up to them too much on the phone,” and he said as much in one of the letters he provided for this study:



This was just a quick 'll someting get this off my chest. The poems and drawings express my feelings a bit more, aint have to much to say

Tyree often incorporates original poetry and artwork in his letters to express himself more fully—something he could not do over the phone or in person. Mario, who is still developing his reading and writing skills, utilizes letters similarly: “If I got these things I want to say to these people and I can’t talk to them...I express myself in the letters.” Like Tyree, Mario recognizes that there is more within him to be said and shared with their loved ones—“I got these things I want to say”—and letters serve as the medium to do so.

Sharing vulnerable thoughts, feelings, or information can come with risk. On the phone, you can be overheard by others, and in an environment where reputation is currency, participants use letters to say things that cannot be said aloud, particularly those written to significant others.

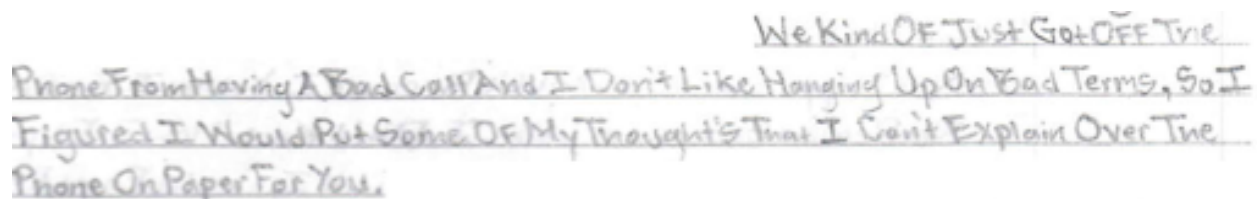
Aware of the constant presence of others, Derrick uses his letters to be sweet and romantic with his girlfriend, which he derided as “simping,” the slang term for being overly affectionate.

“Nobody gotta hear me talking on the phone like simping to my bitch; I can do all my simping on fucking letters.” While Josue maintains regular contact with his sisters and daughter through phone calls, there are still some conversations that he saves for his letters. Through letters, Josue said, “I get more in-depth into my feelings than when I'm in a conversation [on the phone], you know.” Freddy, for the first time in his life, composed a poem for his wife and sent it in a letter; he later read it to her during a visit as well. Freddy met his now-wife through letters as pen pals, communicating with each other for years before meeting in person during a visit, during which he was so nervous, he said, that his glasses fogged up. In Freddy’s case, letter writing provided him with a canvas to express himself in a new way, ultimately serving as a step towards opening himself up verbally with his wife as well.

Letter writing also functions as an outlet for discussing difficult subjects with others, something Joel spoke at length about when describing the letter he provided for this study.

I write letters cause it's like sometimes you can't express yourself how you want to over the phone because—not that you don't have that level of communication, but it's just hard to tell certain people stuff, so it's easier to just write it on paper and then let them read it.

Joel says this explicitly in his letter to his girlfriend:



We Kind Of Just Got Off The  
Phone From Having A Bad Call And I Don't Like Hanging Up On Bad Terms, So I  
Figured I Would Put Some Of My Thoughts That I Can't Explain Over The  
Phone On Paper For You.

Joel laughed as he told me he mostly writes his girlfriend “whenever there’s a problem” and that the letter he provided for this study was one that he “lowkey needed to write.” I asked

him what the purpose of this letter was; after talking around it for a second, he got to the core. “Basically apologize. It's probably like an apology letter,” he said, laughing at himself.

As letter writing is new to him, I asked how he viewed himself as a writer; he replied, “I never really seen myself as a writer, to be honest. I just feel like I'm just expressing myself on paper. Cause I never wrote a book or I never did nothing like that. I'm just trying to communicate.” This notion that certain types of writing are valued more than others is common among the participants; letters are simply communication, but novels, autobiographies, memoirs, poems, lyrics, raps, or even anything composed for school are *real* writing. Joel simply wants to be a better communicator with his girlfriend and appreciates the role that letter writing plays in that process. Regarding the conveyance of his true thoughts and feelings, he said, “I can't do it over the phone. Some things are just hard to communicate about.” Frequency of communication does not guarantee quality, and for Joel, letters are the best medium to say the unsaid:

Lately, I've been calling her over the phone and the communication kinda been like—I kinda feel like she feels like I been on her lately about every little thing. It's kinda been like...bad phone calls because I'm the one tripping. Or, basically, it's my mood and it's messing up the phone calls, so I'm tryna explain to her why I been in that mood on paper. Cause she doesn't know why I'm in that mood.

This conversation through letters—and his apology—was “something we couldn't do over the phone, either cause you got too much pride or sometimes you just don't want to sound dumb, or sometimes you [don't] want to be like, ‘Oh I'm the wrong one.’” Letter writing, however, gives him an opportunity to have these difficult conversations: “But on paper it's less embarrassing cause it's not face-to-face and it's not over the phone.” For Joel and other participants, communicating through letters is the only way to have vulnerable conversations while

incarcerated, as the medium provides them time and space to share themselves and say what cannot be said in person or through the phone.

### *Catharsis*

Participants expressed that a component of saying the unsaid involves an element of catharsis. As Josue described it, “Letters mean everything because that’s the way we un-suffocate ourselves.” For Ulysses, letter writing is an opportunity to reach places within oneself that you would normally avoid, experiencing catharsis in doing so. “I believe the letter process is more heartfelt, more in-depth... There’s something about the letter-writing experience that you really get to, you really go deep... There’s some catharsis in it when you write that way. And it’s unguarded.” Roberto repeated that sentiment himself, simply saying, “It’s cathartic. For me, at least.” Other participants echoed the cathartic component of letters without mentioning the word explicitly. For Derrick, letters are “like a stress reliever, bro, like some type of outlet.” Letters provide the same type of relief for Mario as well: “It helps me out better. It helps me to release a lot of stuff. Pressure.” Discussing the first letter he wrote in jail, one for his father, David said, “It was hard on my heart, you know. It was really from the heart, I would say. It was—it gave me a lot of... relief, you know, when I was writing.”

As a child, Freddy’s first experience with letters was writing to his incarcerated father. In a full-circle moment, one of the first letters Freddy wrote while he himself was incarcerated as an adult was to his father, who, at that time, was on the outside. Unlike the letters he wrote during his father’s time in rehab, this letter was an opportunity for Freddy to say the unsaid, what had been within him for years:

My dad had a lot to do with, I can say, the negative things in my childhood when I was growing up, so I wrote him a letter expressing my feelings towards him. How I felt, you

know? And the things I told him were not good...It was very emotional when I wrote that letter. And his response to it, too, was something that I didn't expect for him to write that way. And he even told me when...he got the letter, and he read it, and it made him, like, quiet. He didn't know how to take the letter. So, then he responded back to me and pretty much apologized for a lot of things that I expressed on that letter.

Freddy felt that the only way he could say these things to his father was through letters: “Based on the way my father is, I feel like if I would have told him in person or over the phone...[he] wouldn't have been paying attention to me, or maybe he would have cut me off, you know.” Because he was able to “lay everything out without no interruptions and...say how [he] felt,” Freddy was finally able to reach his father and be heard.

**“It’s the only way to be heard. It really is.”**

In addition to letters functioning as a mode of communication to say the unsaid, participants value letters as a medium through which they can be heard. Even with the accessibility and frequency of phone calls that is possible in LACJ—though not all housing units have access equally—participants recognized letters as the most effective way to be heard and understood. “The letter can be more important than the phone call cause if they don't pick up the phone, you'll never get through. But with the letter, you know, obviously, they're gonna read it,” said Josue. In a practical sense, letters may be the only way to be heard at times. Racial politics dictates who gets to use what phone and for how long, and at the time the interviews were conducted for this study, only three of the five phones in the school dorm were working. David, in the letter he provided for this study, discussed how there was only one phone available for the 30 or so Black students in the dorm. Joel bluntly explained his workaround to the limited access to phones: “You can't always get in contact with [people], like, fuck it, just write them a letter.”

When participants are able to connect through the phone, calls intended for a specific conversation with an individual can often get off topic, especially when there are multiple people present on the other end of the line. As Edgar explained,

When you're on the phone... my friend might be with her daughter or her sister, so when I'm talking, it's like I'm talking to three people... We're all talking over each other, we're all laughing. And when it's a letter...it's me and my thoughts or my feelings.

While the light, lively phone conversations described by Edgar are meaningful, they can distract from important conversations that need to be had. For those, letter writing is the best medium.

Roberto echoed Edgar's experience, differentiating between communicating through letters and through phone calls. With a letter, he said:

There's no tangents. You know, phone, you can quickly get sidetracked. Sometimes you have an intent to have a conversation on the phone and someone's there. Your cousin's there, all the sudden we're talking about that. You know, I just wasted my phone time.

And I never got to say what I wanted to say.

In addition to getting off topic, Roberto has a theory about phone calls in general: "If you stay on the phone longer than ten minutes, you're gonna argue with who you're talking to. That's just my theory. It's proven true with me, so I tend to keep my phone calls short." He also tries to limit his number of phone calls "to try not to be a phone monster because, like, that's where most of the fights and stuff start;" he believes that arguments on the phone can lead to altercations with others off it. Roberto also explained how conversations often play out in person or on the phone versus in letters. With letters, "you can't go, 'You, you, you, you, you,'" he said, pointing his finger in an accusatory manner, "like when you're having a conversation with someone and you



keep interrupting them.” While that behavior can occur with a phone call, “you can't with a letter.”

The letter Roberto provided for this study exemplifies the desire and opportunity to be heard. Roberto wrote to his wife to receive clarity about their relationship—whether to continue it or not—before he goes to prison. To do so, he needed to address this topic he had been avoiding, and he used this letter as an opportunity to be heard:

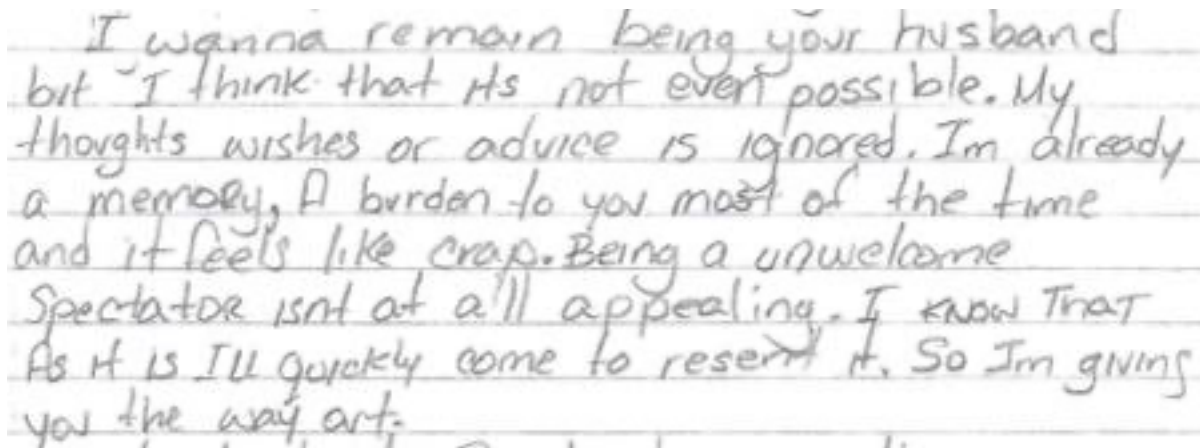
I just tackle, tackle what's really been eating me. I have been ignoring it. I've been delaying it. It's just, I can't ignore this any longer. I gotta address it, I gotta tell her. Because I can't go to prison having these feelings. You know, we have to...resolve it before I leave.

Roberto speaks from experience; in his words, he has been “jailing a long time,” with roughly 24 years already served, off and on, and was recently sentenced to his final term: life in prison. With that reality looming, Roberto addressed his relationship in this letter with finality “because once I get to prison, I have to focus...You can't have a split focus in prison...If you 're gonna have a relationship, it has to be a good relationship or no relationship.”

He and his wife have been writing letters to one another since 1999, though primarily when one or both have been incarcerated. This stint in jail has been tough on Roberto; his wife was his co-defendant, and their conversations through letters had such an impact on him that he ultimately sold their home to bail her out: “Sometimes the letter would come, and I'd read it and [think], ‘Why am I doing this to her?’” And there's nothing I can do...I couldn't have her in jail. It was killing me.”

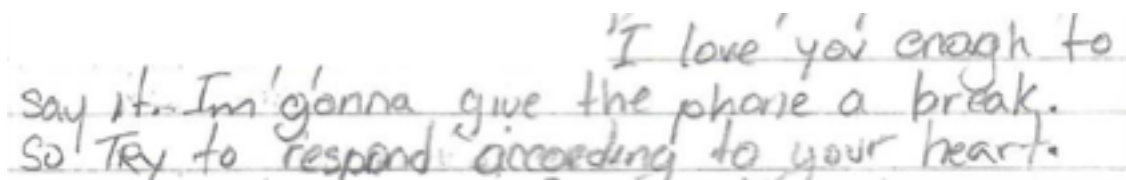
While she was incarcerated, Roberto “was getting two letters a day, three letters a day. And then we bailed her out. And then I didn't get no mail.” The sudden lack of communication

through letters caused him to question where he stood in the relationship, especially after he did “the only honorable thing” he could in their situation: “To release her, I pled guilty. Let me go ahead and fall on the sword here. And since that's happened, I've been feeling like marginalized, back burner-like. Everything else is more important...cause I'm not coming home? What's going on?” Ultimately, Roberto put it all on the page:



I wanna remain being your husband but I think that its not even possible. My thoughts wishes or advice is ignored. Im already a memory, A burden to you most of the time and it feels like crap. Being a unwelcome Spectator isnt at all appealing. I know that As it is I'll quickly come to resent it. So Im giving you the way out.

Though he was concerned about coming across as “whiny,” he used this letter to have a conversation that he had never had before, recounting in our interview, “I never had that. I never had to like, ‘Hey, where do I stand?’ It's the first time for that. Yeah. It's the first time I actually asked her like, ‘Where do I stand?’” To get the clarity and answers that he needed, Roberto forwent speaking on the phone and asked his wife to do so as well, asking her to respond through a letter.



I love you enough to say it. Im gonna give the phrase a break. So try to respond according to your heart.

This letter allowed Roberto to speak from his own heart, and he asks the same of his wife, given the seriousness of this conversation. While Roberto used this letter to be heard himself, he provided his wife the same opportunity: “I say my piece, she writes back, she says her piece...I

have to hear her out.” His final statement on the matter—“I have to hear her out”—underscores how vital letters are when having difficult conversations. There is respect shown to both his wife and the letter itself, and in the same way he expects to be heard, he shows her and her letter equal regard. Roberto’s experience through this letter exemplifies the emotional and relational depths mined through letter writing, supporting the finding that communicating through letters while incarcerated is the most effective medium for being heard.

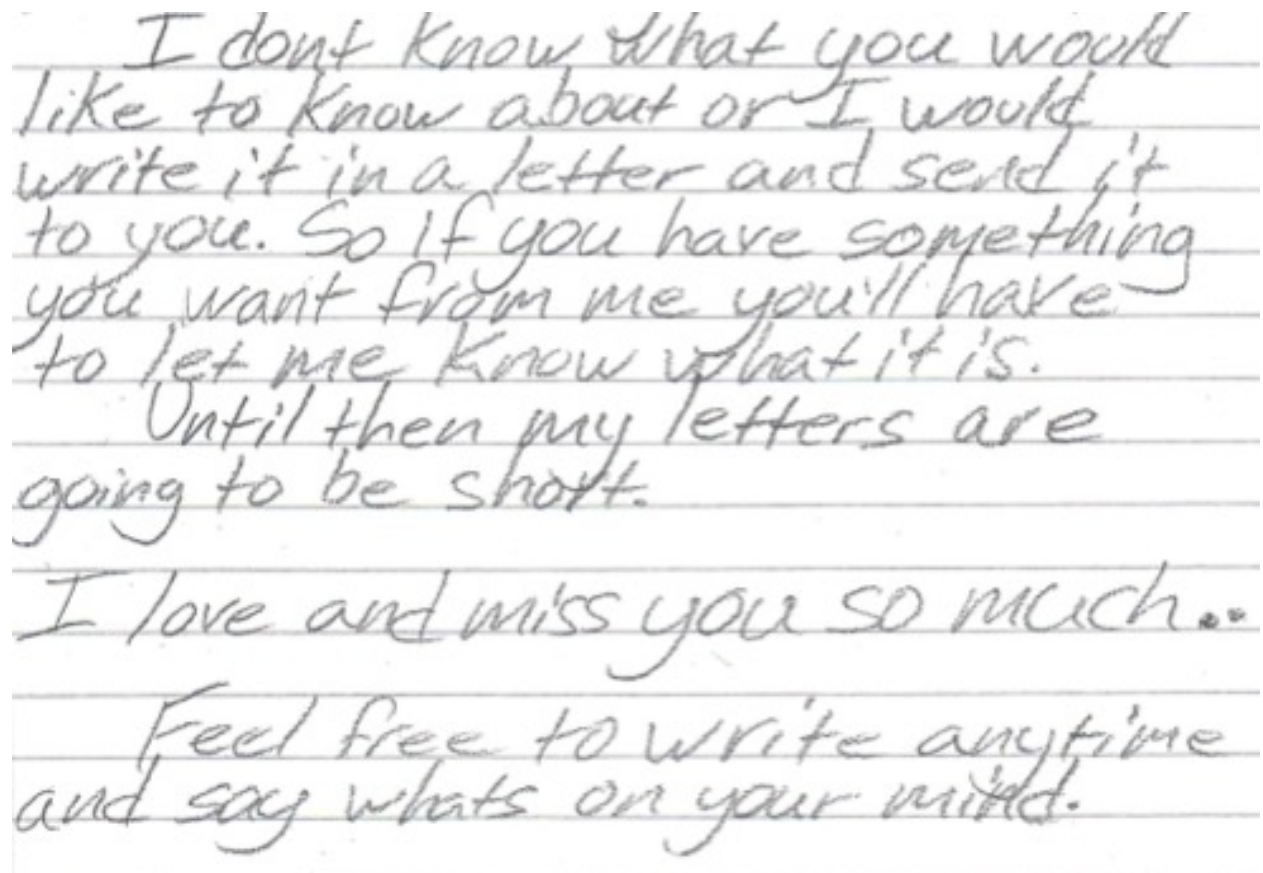
***Not being heard.***

While letters are important in being heard and providing a tangible means of communication, participants also expressed anxiety when letters go unanswered or the writer feels misunderstood. Roberto discussed this aspect regarding his wife—how he felt on the “back burner” when her near-daily letters disappeared—leading him to write the letter provided for this study. When you are heard, “you don’t feel like you’re forgotten...you don’t feel abandoned,” Freddy said. When letters go unanswered, however, those feelings of being discarded and not listened to arise. In some cases, this leads to the end of all communication; in others, it can produce even more letters, as in Richard’s experience.

In the past, Richard would not write personal letters too often—“probably once a month”—but lately he has been writing more to his son, though he has not had contact with him “in probably two months now.” Richard suspects the gap in communication is possibly the result of a harsh letter Richard wrote to his ex-wife about their son’s education—the decision to let their son finish his diploma while homeschooled as opposed to in a traditional school—and Richard believes she shared it with his son. Richard uses his letters to gauge the quality of his son’s education, being “real careful to use proper grammar...to show him that it's necessary to be able to do that.” Despite these attempts, Richard said his son

...hasn't written me a letter back yet because I can almost guarantee that he's probably got very sloppy writing. And I know what the homeschooling experience is; it's not—he probably doesn't want me to see. I would be able to tell by reading a letter where he is.

Not only are his letters going unanswered, but his phone calls are also now. Undeterred, Richard continues to write to his son in hopes of being heard: “This particular letter, I want him to let me know why he's not writing back to me and why he's not answering his phone,” Richard said. At this point, however, Richard's letter is a shot in the dark; he is searching for any type of response or reaction from his son:

The image shows a photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat slanted. The text is as follows:

I dont know what you would like to know about or I would write it in a letter and send it to you. So if you have something you want from me you'll have to let me know what it is.  
Until then my letters are going to be short.  
I love and miss you so much..  
Feel free to write anytime and say whats on your mind.

With phone calls going unanswered, letters are the only way to stay in contact with his son, though he started to doubt whether his son is even reading them. When I asked if he expected to get a response, Richard's only reply was, “I hope so.” Despite the lack of response, Richard

increased his letter-writing output to continue to try to reach his son. Writing letters is something Richard has control over; he can put forth the effort on his end and know he made an honest attempt to communicate. With letters, there is a chance of their being read, even if they are not responded to, and that possibility of still being heard motivates Richard's letter-writing practice.

**Fear of being misunderstood.** An element of not being heard is the concern of being misunderstood in their letters. Recognizing what may be his limitations as a writer, Freddy spoke with an awareness that sometimes what he writes can be received differently than intended.

I could write it in a way to mean one thing, and someone might read it differently, interpret it differently...[or] take something out of context. Or just misinterpret something. But that's probably one of the big differences about writing letters sometimes, because people might take it different.

Edgar shared a similar concern and provided his own example of what they may look like: "You could write something on a piece of paper...for instance, like, 'Oh, fuck off' or something...And the tone, someone might sound funny, one might sound serious, one might sound like depressed." Edgar was making the point that the phrase "Oh, fuck off" can be interpreted in different ways, so "when it's a letter writing, the words you use...how you use the words and the order you use" them, matters.


To help clarify the meaning of their sentences or phrases, participants often employ a strategy they use when texting on the streets: emojis. As Joel said

Out there we use emojis when we text, so right here we try to write emojis, like we try to do smiley faces or like sticking out tongue faces or sad faces, like whatever you're saying in the sentence, then right after put like a little face.

Joel said he uses these emojis to help clarify his writing for his audience. For him they add:

More emotion, more feelings. So they could kinda understand like—cause you could, they could read something, but it really probably don't got emotion... You put a little face on it then it kinda like means—you kinda understand what that sentence means.

Josue also utilizes emojis to help clarify the intended meaning of what he writes, providing cues for his audience. “That's why I use a lot of emojis...I'll write, depending on the emojis, sometimes, I write a mad emoji or happy emoji or emoji sticking out the tongue” so that his recipient will “know that I'm joking.” Josue learned to use emojis—“we didn't even call them emojis back then, you just draw little faces”—in his letters from an “older homie” when he was first incarcerated—before Joel and some of the younger participants were even born. “That was [something] a homie taught me. I seen how he would do it, and then I was like, man,” he paused before referencing his letter, “this is actually his emoji.” He turned the page around to show me

the  he drew after his recipient's name. “I can't take credit for it. But I been using this for 20-some years,” he said, laughing. “It's real common in here” to include emojis or little faces in letters, but each writer “draw[s] their own” version. While letter writing may be a medium through which participants can discuss complicated or vulnerable topics, they may not have the writing skills to successfully convey their thoughts or emotions onto the page, leading to continuous practice and creative means to be heard.

**Finding Four: Participants consider the letters they write as gifts and use multiple strategies to personalize their compositions for their recipients.**

In addition to the value that letters have for the individual letter writer—as self-expression, exploring identity, catharsis, saying the unsaid, and being heard—participants expressed that letters are as important, if not more important, for the recipient. Participants described letters as an essential way to maintain and build relationships with their loved ones on

the outside and described their letter-writing process with a clear sense of audience awareness, personalizing their letters for each recipient. They are highly aware of the role that letters play in the lives of their recipients as tangible gifts and proof of assurance. Participants also consider the legacy of letters and their lives, an aspect that provides meaning outside of and beyond themselves.

**“It’s like sending out a gift...I can’t go to the mall [and] buy nothing, so this is my gift.”**

As previously discussed, staying connected with loved ones through the phone or visits is incredibly valuable to these participants, but these modes of communication fade to memory once completed. But “letters are real powerful,” as Josue described them, because of their ability to recall feelings, memories, and images of the the letter writer. For Josue, these invocations and the letter itself are “like sending out a gift.” Joel’s description of how he feels *receiving* letters explains their gift-like qualities.

I got a lot of good letters right there that I read like whenever I’m feeling down, I’ll probably go read it, you know. Or whenever I miss somebody, I’ll read it and like see what they tell me, you know. And like, it like brings that feeling back, it’s like more solid. Cause, like, if someone tells you something, you probably gonna remember, but you’ll forget it, though. But a letter, you can reread it and re-feel those feelings again.

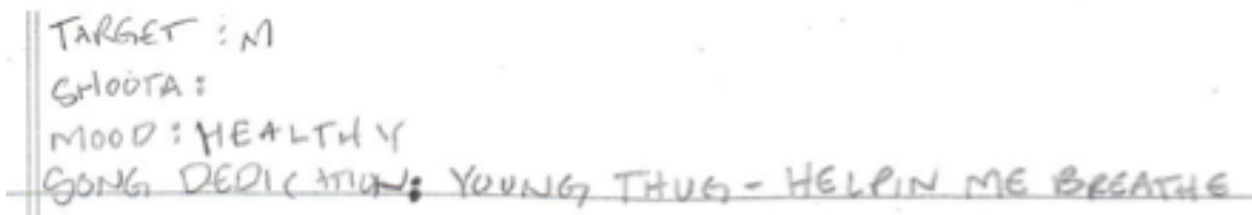
I asked Joel if he considers providing this for others through his letters; he answered with a simple and quiet, “Yeah.”

“It’s like the little things that count. The multiple manys,” Edgar said, recognizing how important letters are as gifts. Derrick, who only writes letters to his girlfriend, talked about using letters as a stand-in for presents he would normally buy on the outs. Describing the format of his letters, he said:

In the very beginning, I'm giving my girl all the compliments, cause I used to buy my girlfriend flowers like every day—not every day, but any time I could, I go buy my bitch flowers. So, I just be giving her flowers... you feel me, like whenever I start the letters. To mimic the frequency of buying flowers for his girlfriend, and unafraid to be seen as “simpling” in front of me, Derrick said he writes as often as he can, comparing his practice to a scene in the book/film *The Notebook*. (In the movie, the character Noah writes a letter to his lost love every day for a year.)

For me, it's more so about the consistency. I'm trying to write my girl like *The Notebook*, you feel me? For real. ‘I-wrote-you-every-day-for-a-year-or-as-much-as-I-could-n\*\*\*\*-while-I-was-in-jail’ type shit.

Before he gets to the “flowers” in the body of his letters, Derrick incorporates a technique to personalize his letters. “You seriously never learnt this? You ain’t talk to nobody Black?” he asked, laughing. “This is some prison shit.” He turned the letter around so I could read the top clearly:



TARGET : M  
SHOOTA :  
MOOD : HEALTHY  
SONG DEDICATION: YOUNG THUG - HELPIN ME BREATHE

No other participant I had spoken to had utilized Derrick’s method of personalizing his letters, but I have seen it since on a letter a student shared in class. Derrick explained,

So, every time when I do my letter in the beginning, the top header part I put "Target"—well, my girlfriend's name, you feel me. Basically, who I'm writing to. I put "Shoota," you feel me—my name. So, it's like the target and the shoota, *bop*, make sure it gets to you. I put the "Mood." Most people—I seen it different ways. I seen some n\*\*\*\*s that



don't put the mood, and I seen some people that do, you feel me. So, I put the mood. It's hard. That's probably the hardest part for me, is thinking of the mood, like the right word for the mood. I should buy like a thesaurus or something.

I asked him whether the mood referred to his mood while writing the letter or the mood for the letter itself.

It can be either or. Like sometimes it's the mood for, the tone for the letter, and sometimes it's my mood. But it's mostly positive, so I try to think of like positive shit. I don't try to never think negative in my life. And then the final line at the bottom of the header is "Song Dedication" because when she get the letter, I want her to listen to the song while she reading it. So it's like, I'll put a bunch of different song dedications...Most of the time I want to pick some shit that I know she be listening to, like songs that remind me of her and shit. So that's when I put the song dedication.

Derrick's method of personalization individualizes his letters; even though he only writes to one person, his girlfriend, each letter is special. By beginning each letter with this structure, he creates a specific experience for his reader that goes beyond the words on the page. He recently used his song dedication to directly reference his work: "My last letter, I wrote four pages. I dedicated her that Aaliyah '4 Page Letter.'" While he cannot bring different flowers to his girlfriend like he used to on the streets, he uses these letters as gifts in their stead, with the different arrangements of song dedications and moods making each letter a personalized bouquet.

Echoing Derrick's creation of mood, atmosphere, and soundtrack, Mario described experiencing the writing and reading of letters "like you're watching a movie and stuff." The letter that he provided for the interview was written to a friend of his on the outside who is

“going through some stuff herself... So, I was just... trying to give her, cheer her up a little bit, you know. What I do is try to make them laugh a little bit.” Even though Mario is “going through some stuff,” i.e., incarceration in jail, he composed this letter to provide his friend support, to give her the simple gift of a smile: “That’s what I do, try to give them a little smile, a little face, you know what I mean. Everybody deserves that.”


Mario read aloud and analyzed his letter during our interview, stopping to comment on personalized elements of his letter and the effect he hoped they would have on his recipient. His recitation and real-time analysis provided depth and insight into his composition process, highlighting the individualized touches he included to make his letter special for his friend. He began by describing the importance of writing her name in a different, stylized font:





He believes that addressing letters to their recipient in this way adds value: “First of all, her name needs to look unique on the letter. At least she’ll save it for that. She ain’t gonna wanna waste this regular writing... I think her name should be special writing before anything, you know.” Even before he writes the body of the letter, Mario considers how Sad Eyes will keep this gift because it is “unique” and “special;” if the letter was entirely composed with “regular writing,” his recipient would not save it. Of note, Mario did not draw this artwork himself but rather asked a friend to do so. As discussed in the next finding, other participants described relying on others for artwork and stylized writing as well.

To add to the specialness—and to increase the probability that Sad Eyes will keep the letter—Mario added personal touches throughout that represent himself and their relationship,

saying, “We know how to—we know each other, so. And most of the time I speak to her, I speak to her in certain ways. She knows, you know, what I’m talking about.” He introduced the letter

with , his phonetic spelling of *ciao*, which he described as “mean[ing] like ‘Hi’ in a different way.” He similarly concluded his letter with a phonetic spelling of *voila*—


—“that’s like a saying like ‘[Voila!]<sup>!</sup>—take that,’ you know?” His

 is a playful representation of “something we say,” a way for him to connect with his recipient and personalize this letter through “little things, you know what I mean?”

Similar to how Derrick includes song dedications to make each letter unique, Mario began the letter with a playful allusion to Eminem’s 2002 song “Without Me” (“Guess who’s back, back again”), which he included to “put a smile on her face...give her a little joke here or there.” In the conclusion of his letter, he shares the song “Can You Dig It” by Brenton Wood (though he substitutes the Los Angeles neighborhood of Brentwood).

Earlier in our conversation, Mario mentioned how he experiences letter writing “like you’re watching a movie,” and he creates his own scenes as he reads along with the letter:

*‘You miss me?’ (And right now, right there she’s gonna be like, she’ll stop, and she’ll be like, she’ll laugh, you know? In my thoughts.) I do a lot. It’s cool if you don’t—I’m 100% sure you do. (And she’ll smile there.)*

He added  after “I’m 100% sure you do,” perhaps signaling her cue. His inclusion of a smiley face echoes the writing processes of other participants, who similarly incorporate emojis for effect and clarity.

Mario has the lowest literacy skills and experience of all the participants, yet while his letter contains misspellings and other grammatical errors, his purpose for writing and the strategies he employs in that process show an understanding of the components of letter writing and their power. Not only is his letter a gift for Sad Eyes, but he also experiences the joy of letters. For him, sending out letters “means a lot. Feels good, too. Like when you...send it out, you're waiting for them to get it. It's the feeling that I get, it feels good.” As Mario described them, letters “bring...back memories,” and “memories—it’s the most beautiful thing.” Through this letter, Mario experiences them—“I remember things that we did together”—and creates new ones for his recipient.

Like Derrick and Mario, nearly all the letters Tyree sends out are gifts for others, and they often include original poetry and artwork. As most of his letters either come at the request of others or for an explicit purpose, he uses his phone calls as inspiration: “First we gotta talk, so it’s kinda like an interview with them;” from there, “I think about what I can symbolize, draw. What would help them that they could see every day, like motivate them in a good way?” Over the span of the composition process, Tyree “would have more than one conversation with them...[because] there's more stuff they went through every day.” Composing a letter can take “a week, two weeks” before sending it to his recipient.

The letter/poem entitled “Distant Lover” was meant to address “the in-between the stuff we talk about on the phone,” and Tyree provided both the rough and final drafts of this letter. The visual contrast between the two is stark; the rough draft was written quickly in block letters, whereas the final copy was carefully crafted in cursive script. He acknowledged that people who see his work being written and even those who receive his letters are surprised at the visual difference between the two: “They're like, ‘Man, this ain’t you, this ain’t—you really did this?’

And then...they're like 'Okay, yeah.'" Tyree composes his letters over the course of multiple drafts, but he saves his best work for the final draft—the gift—to be mailed out. Not only does he modify his handwriting, but he includes the artwork he designed specifically for his recipient:



Tyree's artwork is one of the components that make each of his letters a gift, and he uses his drawings to complement the letter's content and express himself more fully. He knows how valuable these letters are for those he writes to, and he reenacted some of the responses he gets from those recipients: "That's cool; thank you, man; I needed that; I hung it up in my house;...I laminated it." Tyree knows that his creativity and talent are gifts, and through his letters—gifts themselves—he shares them as much as possible.

**“Give them hope...Hope, faith, belief.”**

As gifts, letters have the power to remind their recipients of the letter writer’s existence, and since they can be read and reread, what is on the page is vitally important. Josue, on the advice of others, writes letters to his daughter so she knows he is always thinking about her.

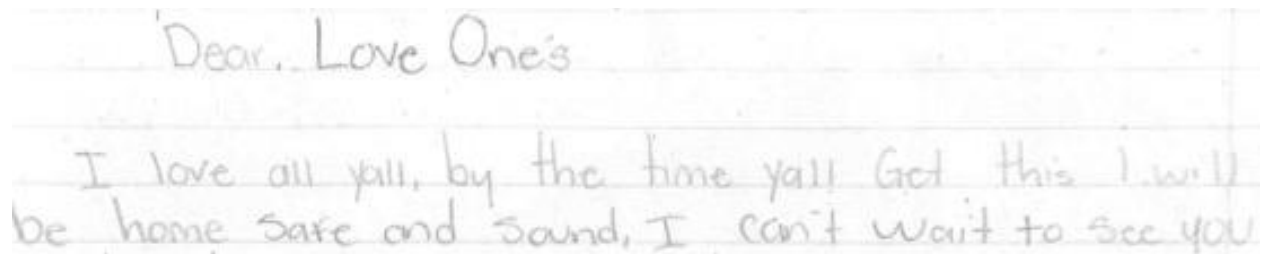
My daughter—I been in prison all her life. She's gonna be 13 this year. I been out probably like 10 months of those 13 years. And I'm not proud of it or nothing, but I constantly—one of the older homies told me a long time ago, write to your daughter no matter what. Keep writing, writing, writing, writing. Always write to her so that she knows, you know.

Maintaining a relationship with anyone while incarcerated is a challenge, so assuring his daughter that he is still a part of her life is vital. “People don't seem to realize that when we're in here, our family's doing time with us, you know. And that's something I had to learn throughout these years. At first, I didn't think about that.” That change in mindset reinforced his commitment to letter writing: “My daughter gots to know that her dad loves her. That's why I always write, write, write, write. She never writes back, but that's just how kids are, you know.” Even though she does not reply in writing herself, Josue is undeterred. He writes “so that she has something,” a gift from him to hold on to, and does not expect the same in return; Josue knows that the true joy of gifts lies in giving, not receiving.

Participants expressed using their letters as a way to assure their family and friends that they are well—whether that is always the case or not—the gift being the piece of mind they can provide to loved ones. Lamont uses his letters for that purpose. This is his first time being incarcerated, and the experience has been challenging. Like other participants, and as discussed in Finding Two, Lamont uses his letters as a way to make sense of this time at LACJ—writing

for himself, keeping his letters, and rereading them to “see if [he’s] the same person”—but he also uses his letters as a means to provide assurance to his family from afar. He writes “every other day,” though he is selective about the letters he mails, and stated that all of his letters are written with the purpose to “kinda give them hope...hope, faith, belief”—powerful gifts for concerned loved ones.

The letter Lamont provided for this study, written in early January, was one such assurance letter intended to give his family hope and faith that he would be coming home soon. While he ultimately decided not to send this letter, Lamont said that it was representative of the type of letters he does mail out. The letter was to be sent to one individual but meant for all. It begins:



Dear Love One's

I love all yall, by the time yall Got this I will be home safe and sound, I can't wait to see you

Throughout the one-page letter, Lamont recounts the holidays he has missed and assures his family that he will see them soon. He includes that component in all his letters. “A particular thing I talk about is when I go home, the joy in the moment...That's like one of the topics that I always put in the letter. When I come home.” Here, he wrote

i'm literally fiending to go home. I don't see no other way after January 22, 2024. I only see me going home from court on the 22nd. I just want to give thanks to the lord for staying with me. And giving me the power to believe and having the power to receive. The same day i come home which will be January 22nd i will cry like a baby not because i was in jail but because im now home. Its been a long time coming so im a make it last longer.

In the first sentence, Lamont describes his longing for home as “fiending,” using the language of one withdrawing from substances. In our interview, he spoke of letters providing writers opportunities to be their true selves and show emotion; Lamont does so here when he openly writes about “cry[ing] like a baby” when he returns home. Instead of being a “hard body” like men often feel pressured to be in jail, Lamont can write openly about his emotions; the sharing of his full self is a gift in itself.

Because this letter was intended for his family, he added certain elements for their benefit, especially his mother; in the letter, he specifically asks the recipient to send a photograph of the letter to her. I asked Lamont how he communicates differently when writing to different people, and he contrasted what he writes to his mother with what he writes to his girlfriend.

Like with my mom, I'mma tell her that I'm good so she won't have to worry too much, you know. My girl, you know, just ready to come home; certain days is heavier than others. Express more to her than expressing more to my mom. My mom, is more so, you know, God's guardian. So, it's like, can't really tell her too much about what's going on cause she's sensitive. So, I try to leave that part of me fiending to go home, homesick, withdrawing, really too much away from her, to what I tell my girlfriend.



Viewing his mother as “God’s guardian,” Lamont purposefully withholds information to protect her from his reality and to assure her that he is doing okay, even if that is not the case. He tells his mother “a little bit of everything” but tells his girlfriend “more so everything—how it’s going, how I feel,” even the fact that he “feel[s] like going crazy or something like that.” Lamont’s incarceration has been hard on everyone in his life, particularly his mother and younger siblings; his letters provide “little bit of hope and belief...It get worse before it get better. I'm waiting for the better part.” Knowing that his loved ones will read and reread his letters, Lamont purposefully uses his letters as a means of assurance, giving his family the gift of peace of mind and, as he reiterated multiple times in our interview, “hope, faith, belief.”

**“After you're gone, your letters—it’s proof you were alive.”**

Participants expressed a unique awareness of and hope for their letters to outlast themselves, leaving or creating a legacy by which their loved ones can remember them. They shared that letters are both valuable and powerful because of their impact on those on the outside, the memories they create for both the writer and the recipient, and the legacy they leave. Josue shared that the letters he sends to his loved ones are “something that they can keep and treasure cause I'm not gonna be around forever. Nobody is. But in this lifestyle, you never know.” He writes his letters with awareness of his own mortality and what he will ultimately leave behind. Talking about letters in general before referencing the letter he had written, Josue said, “This is more you. This is a piece of someone. This is a piece of me. When she gets the letter, she's always gonna have a piece of me, no matter what happens.” Josue is “looking at 100 years to life” as a possible sentence, so the concept of legacy and mortality is real for him; he acknowledged that he will likely die in prison, so the letters he leaves behind, particularly those for his daughter, will be all that is left of him.

Roberto shared a similar view as he revealed to me in our interview that he was recently sentenced to life in prison. As he said this, he leaned back in his chair, placed his hand on the table, and swept his arm in a motion that seemed to represent the totality of time. He continued,

There's no history on a phone call. You can't go back and say, 'Hey, he was here.' But my daughter, my friends, my wife—they all have letters from me, so if I die tomorrow, they still have an essence of who I am. That's the only thing. After you're gone, your letters—it's proof you were alive. That's the only proof. Text messages? You can't say, 'Hey, he was here.'

Like Josue's statement that letters are "a piece of someone," Roberto used similar language by describing letters as containing an "essence" of who he is. These two quotes exemplify participants' valuing of the ability of letters to distill and concretize their selves into tangible artifacts that outlast themselves.

For participants, as Roberto described, this tangibility of letters and their permanence are unique qualities that separate them from other forms of communication, even written communication like text messages. Tyree contrasted letters to phone calls, saying, "A call—you can miss a call. But every day that letter is gonna be with you. You see it. And...you cherish it." Ulysses spoke on this aspect of letters as well, stating:

I think it's something tangible...for the person that receives them. It's something that they can go back to and read and still get the same feelings that they got initially. Sometimes it may change, the feelings may change maybe, but it's something tangible that you can go back to. It's something that is gonna be there.

Participants frequently compose their letters with this in mind, knowing and hoping that their recipients keep the letters that they receive. Edgar's mother did just that, as he recently learned

before returning to jail. While helping her go through items at her house, Edgar found boxes of his old letters, some going back to his time in juvenile hall. Reading through them, he asked why she kept his letters. “She told me, ‘The way you write, it's like you're talking. Like you're here.’” By keeping his letters, part of Edgar—his essence, as Roberto may call it—always remained with his mother. Derrick had a similar experience, proudly recounting to me a phone call when he heard his girlfriend rifle through his letters: “I just hear a bunch of paper like yeah, she holding on to that shit somewhere.” He said this with a proud smile and head nod as if the memory provided validation for his writing practice.

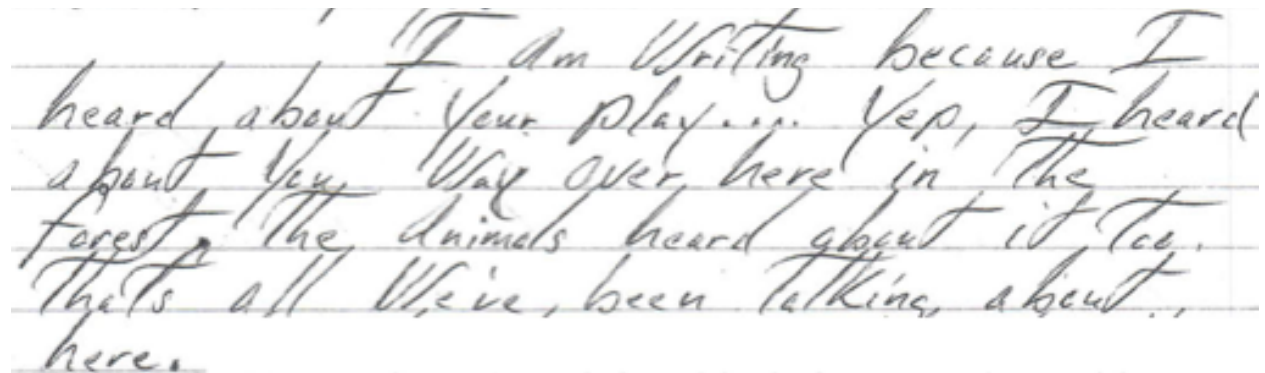
Ulysses’ letter that he provided for this study is exemplary of the lasting legacy of letters. When I asked him about his letter, he was overcome with emotion multiple times, pausing for extended periods to compose himself. “This letter is to my niece. She's the same age...” Ulysses trailed off and fixed his eyes on something there but not there; we sat in silence for 33 seconds before he continued.

Excuse me. She's the, she's the same age my sister was when I first came in. So, with my sister, I wrote to her when she was young...At the time she didn't know how to write back, but she always, she always looked forward to those letters. And they meant a lot to her. And helped her, even though I didn't know what she was going through. *(20 second pause)*. So, for me being able to do that for my niece—and I know that she can't read, they're read to her—but I know it means something to her. And I know oftentimes kids are overlooked. *(22 second pause)*. I think it's important for, for her, for any child to know that they have somebody they can call upon. If I can be that for her or for anyone then that's what I'm gonna be.

In this composition to his 5-year-old niece, Ulysses considered the lasting impact of his letter, considering their relationship as it is now with a message that translates to the future. He purposefully writes his letters to both his niece and nephew in a manner that meets them at their level and is representative of their relationship.

I call her and her little brother my little wolves, and basically, whenever they know I'm on the phone...they'll put me on speaker phone or whatever it is, and I'll do like a little howling sound, and they respond. So, I started the letter off like that, like I was howling, and that's kinda like our little call sign.

His niece recently sang in a performance at her school, and Ulysses, playing into the role of Wolf, wrote to congratulate her:

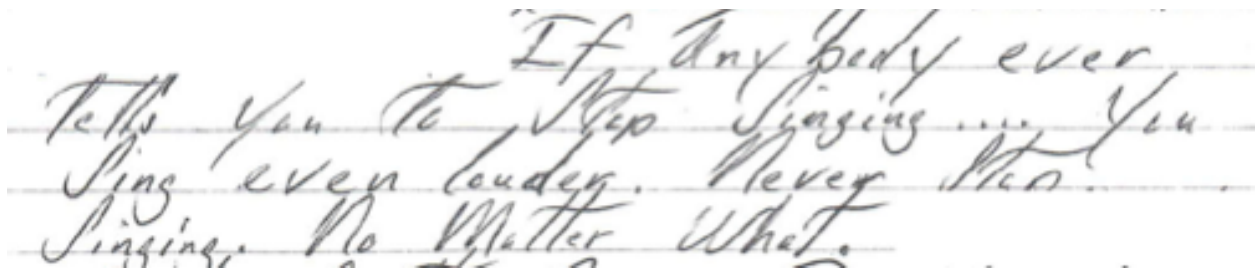


I am Writing because I heard about your play. Yes, I heard about you way over here in the forest. The animals heard about it too. That's all we've been talking about here.

Ulysses uses this approach with purpose.

I wanted to connect on her level...because I don't think that anybody really, really does that with her for the most part. And I think that they expect her to be older than she is or grown up, and I think she should have time to be a kid. And so, I try to connect with her on that level where it's a fun thing for her, but at the same time it's something that, it has a message. A message that she can understand at her level and something she will accept; she'll be able to apply if that's what she wants to do.

The message Ulysses wrote for her was:



If anybody ever  
tells you to stop singing... you  
sing even louder. Never stop  
singing. No matter what.

His experience with and personal philosophy about letters underscores his approach to writing; he is not only intentional about the content itself but also mindful of letters' lasting power.

Discussing the message behind this letter, Ulysses said:

I always felt that when you write, a person could go back and read it even years from now. So, she could have this letter, if it makes it throughout the years...in college someday. And she could have this letter, and she could go back—maybe somebody tells her to stop singing, maybe she's singing in a play in college, and somebody tells her her voice is bad. She can go back to that letter.

Ulysses writes to his niece with an awareness of both the present and the future, but in his own life, he is reckoning with the past. Sentenced as a juvenile to life without the possibility of parole, Ulysses has been at LACJ for the past two years while he appeals that sentence from 26 years ago. His future is unknown; he very well could serve his entire sentence and remain incarcerated for the rest of his life, dying in prison. That is his reality. For Ulysses, like Roberto, who was recently sentenced to life in prison, and Josue, who is looking at 100 years to life, letters mean something more than just a means to communicate; they contain the “essence of who I am,” “a piece of me,” and “proof you were alive.”

**Finding Five: Participants utilize the classroom, its resources, and their peers to support their letter-writing process.**

While the previous findings discussed the participants' experience with letter writing and the role letters play in their lives, Finding Five explores the various strategies these participants utilize during the composition process. As students enrolled in the education program at LACJ, the participants in this study have access to resources that the general population does not have: a classroom space, classmates, teachers, books, dictionaries, and supplies. All participants spoke on how the school environment has been essential to their letter-writing practices to varying degrees, and both novice and experienced letter writers discussed seeking the support of or providing support to others during the composition process.

**“The classroom setting for me is ideal.”**

While participants ultimately write letters when and wherever they can, “the classroom,” as Ulysses told me, “is ideal” in contrast to the dorm. Both he and Joel provided a clear picture of what dorm living is like and why it makes writing letters in that environment difficult. As Joel described it,

It's so busy in the dorm you gotta—you gotta program, you gotta work out, you gotta worry about what the other race is doing to your homies. Like, you always gotta, like, be doing something. There's stuff on TV you don't want to miss, you gotta get on the phone, you gotta shower, you gotta eat, so it's so much stuff going on...But whenever you get some quiet—and it's never quiet, it's never quiet, not even at night. TVs are on all night, everybody's up, so...that's why I find time [to write] in class.

Ulysses pointed out another issue of writing in the dorm: lack of writing space. Due to racial politics and negotiations, an individual may only have access to certain areas of the shared space.

As such, a bunk may be the only place to write if designated tables are occupied. As Ulysses explained,

Sometimes you don't have a table to write on. So, you'll be writing on top of somebody's bunk but then if somebody's laying down or something like that or wants to lay down then it's kinda like you gotta be a little courteous, move to the side or something.

In the powder keg-like conditions of the dorm, any disruption to the established order risks serious consequences. Roberto said he is “either reading in my cut or writing in my cut; I don't leave my cut that much” to avoid getting mixed up in anything in the dorm. Like Roberto, Freddy said, “I just make my own private space, and I just be right there by myself and write the letters.” He also stated that the dorm setting can be a hindrance to his letter-writing practice, emphasizing the importance of “the type of environment I'm in. What I'm saying is like if there's people around me and it's too loud or something and that distracts me, I won't write.” These participants provide an understanding of the realities and limitations of writing letters in the dorm

Participants acknowledged that while writing letters inevitably takes place in their housing location, writing in the classroom is a more productive. Echoing the words of Ulysses and Roberto, Lamont said he writes his letters “more so in class...It's too much going on in the dorm to really just sit at a table and really write a letter, as far as distractions...I'm very distracted up there if I'm trying to write a letter.” In the more controlled classroom setting, distractions are limited, providing a space for participants to focus. While he “usually write[s] in the dorm, wherever I get the chance, whenever I'm feeling it,” the letter that Josue provided for this study was one he wrote “during school, during class, cause I had to put it in the mailbox.” Similarly, Richard started and completed his letter when he had “five minutes” in between

assignments. Derrick “normally write[s] in class,” he said, because “it’s a little easier...If I finish my work, I can start half a letter.” Though he may finish the letter back in the dorm, beginning the writing process in the classroom provides Derrick an opportunity to concentrate. David shared a similar experience, preferring to write his letters “either during school or after school;” the classroom provides a catalyst for David to begin his letters which he then carries over to the dorm, representing the transfer of classroom practices into real-world application.

### ***The Classroom as a Resource Provider***

Participants described the classroom not only as a space to write their letters, but also as a site to obtain materials to produce their work. For all incarcerated individuals in jail, “you basically have to buy everything” that you need to write and mail letters, Ulysses said. Pencils, erasers, paper, envelopes, and stamps must all be purchased from the jail store, also referred to by participants as the canteen or commissary. Participants shared that pens are not for sale from the store in the county jail—though they can be purchased in the state prisons. (Students who have experience in both the county jail and state prisons often question this logic, stating that the half-length pencils purchased in the jail are potentially more dangerous as weapons and an equally viable source of ink for tattoos—if one were inclined to use pencils for anything other than their intended purpose.) For students enrolled in the high school diploma program, however, paper, pencils, and erasers are available daily, and every participant in this study spoke about using school supplies for their personal letter writing; the only materials they do not have access to at school are envelopes and stamps. As David described, “I have to order the envelopes from the store—the commissary—and the paper I get from school, the pencils I get from school.” Freddy shared a similar statement, saying, “Well, I got the envelopes through the commissary. Pencils also through commissary or the school; paper, lined paper, as well through commissary



or through school as well.” For students who may not have money on their books, i.e., funds to purchase items from store, the school can be the only resource for paper and pencils to write their letters.

Ulysses painted a clear picture of the reality of using paper and pencil to write letters and how these tools can be a potential hindrance to the letter-writing process.

The supplies obviously are a factor here as well. For example, for the most part the, we're gonna have to write with pencils and we don't have a sharpener [in the dorm]. So if you don't have a sharpener and you're writing a letter, if it's a long letter, you're gonna sit there with a razor blade cutting your pencil, trying to sharpen it—it's gonna take forever. And that, for me, that process for me oftentimes my hand doesn't move fast enough for me. So as I'm writing, I'm often thinking and my hand is not going fast enough, so if I have to stop with the pencil and sharpen it, oftentimes my thoughts will be lost and some, I won't get them back because of the way that I write. So that's a problem for me. But the pencils are probably one of the biggest problems for me when it comes to writing.

Ulysses describes how the lack of certain resources—namely, a sharpener—in the dorm can affect his composition process, interrupting the transfer of thoughts to the page; by utilizing the classroom as a space to write, Ulysses and all students have access to materials that allow them to write unimpededly.

### ***The Classroom as a Site of Inspiration***

The classroom functions not only as a space where participants can engage in their extracurricular writing and obtain materials, but the learning that occurs there, even when not directly related to writing, has an influence on their letter-writing practices. For Mario, simply being enrolled in school gives him motivation to write more on his own, and he seeks the help of

others to do so, saying, “Actually, [it] like motivates me when I come. I wanna come to school. Now it's not that embarrassing to tell my friend ‘How you spell this, how you do this?’” Mario has spent a lot of time in and out of jail and prison, but this is the first time he has been enrolled in an education program; he is aware of the school's impact on his literacy development, both in and out of the classroom. In this environment that encourages learning and growth, Mario feels more comfortable bringing in his outside writing practices because of the access to support.

David, incarcerated and writing letters for the first time in his life, described how the classroom has affected his writing skills and, ultimately, his letters.

I wasn't really thinking about writing at all. When I first came, my writing skills were real poor. I wouldn't put commas, I wouldn't really put—I would barely put periods, till I'm like, ‘I think I can write about something new.’ But after really being in school and having to do a lot of writing in all these classes, it really made my sentence structure better and really understand that the way you form the sentences and everything, use all the words, is really important.

David's enrollment in school not only improved his writing both in and out of the classroom, but also led him to eventually write letters to his parents. He had communicated with other friends and family through letters, but he avoided doing so with his parents out of shame and embarrassment.

When I first came into the jail, I didn't want to write to my parents. It was hard for me to really talk to them cause they did so much for me, and [I] kinda like threw my life away.

That's how I was thinking when I first came.

“Till I got to school, I didn't write to them,” he said, prompting me to inquire what it was about school that incited that change. “I just got to talk to more people and understand people got

experiences with the same type of thing,” he said. For David, the classroom is not only a place where he can learn and grow academically, but it is also a space where he has been able to learn about himself and his experience through community with his classmates. That learning served as a catalyst to expand his letter-writing practice as much as any academic endeavor.

While David discussed the influence of his classmates on his letter writing, Freddy spoke on his teachers' effect on his literacy skills and language acquisition.

One thing I tend to pay attention to is how the teachers talk... I pay attention to how they use words, or like when I hear them use a word I hear on television or the newspaper, I'll, “Okay, that's how you use that word.” So, to learn it, I'll write it like that...And I'll use the word sometimes too.

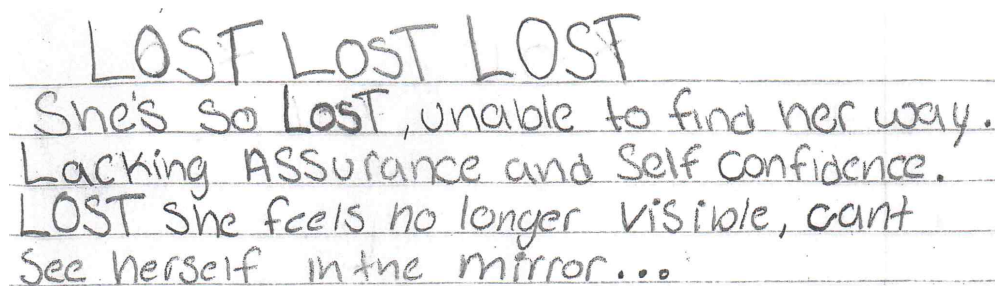
Freddy respected his teachers being “more educated,” but he clarified that he did not see himself and his classmates as “less educated,” just as having a different background. Expanding his vocabulary is important to Freddy—“I always have a dictionary with me, so I'm always trying to do my best to make sure I write the words correctly”—and having teachers model language and its usage supports that literacy goal.

Like David and Freddy, simply being in the school environment has influenced Tyree's authentic writing practices. Tyree, who frequently mails out hybrid letter-poems and drawings to his loved ones, often finds inspiration in the classroom, using dictionaries to help define specific words he hears or reads in class. “I'm like, ‘Damn, I been using it the whole time and I didn't really know what it meant,’” he said, acting out his reaction to reading the dictionary. “I'm like, ‘Oh, let me write this down, Imma start a poem called that.’” One of Tyree's letters he provided for his interview began from a word he heard in class; he then went to the dictionary to learn more. “The word that started this was ‘inadequate.’ We was talking about inadequate in...class.

So ‘inadequate,’ and then it was ‘unappreciated’ was like a word that was in the definition.” The discussion in class and his further exploration of the meaning of “inadequate” provided him with an opportunity for self-reflection and, ultimately, content for his writing.

[The definition] sound like they don't know where they at in their life and where they stand, they don't know they value, lacking assurance, self-confidence. That's kinda what I was feeling. I'm in jail, I'm not shit, I got blues on. Kinda like couldn't see myself in the mirror. Damn, who—what do I look like? I don't know how I feel.

As a way of “doing [his] own connotation” and deepening his understanding of the term, Tyree composed a poem, “Lost,” that he later included in a letter. It begins:



A photograph of a handwritten poem on lined paper. The text is written in black ink and reads: "LOST LOST LOST", "She's so LOST, unable to find her way.", "Lacking ASSurance and Self confidence.", "LOST she feels no longer visible, cant", "See herself in the mirror...".

Tyree’s initial version of the poem was about himself written in the third person—“it started off with me and how I was feeling”—but he changed the pronouns to personalize the writing for the recipient of his letter. “Then I switched it up and put ‘she’s,’ and I sent it to somebody. And I’m on the phone and they’re like crying like, ‘Oh, you did this for me.’ I’m like, ‘If you feel like that,’” he told me with a smile and a shrug. School, through the content discussed in class and the resources provided for further exploration, led to the composition of Tyree’s poem, originally written about and for himself, and later his letter. His experience is exemplary of the effect that the classroom has on the intra- and extracurricular writing practices of participants.

### *Collaboration with Peers*

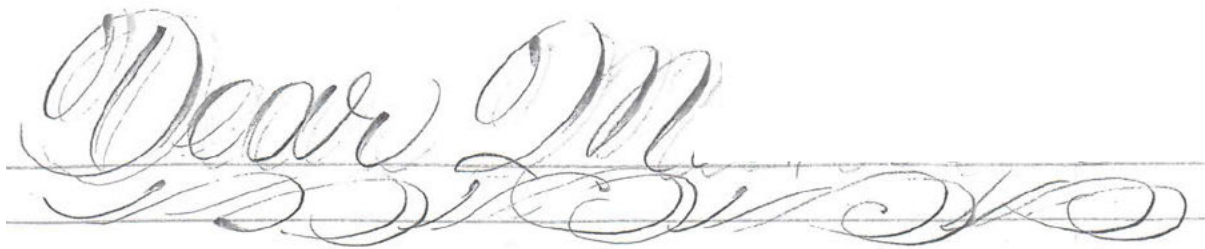
Several participants shared that they relied on other incarcerated individuals, their fellow class/dormmates, to help them compose and mail their letters. The first few letters David mailed out never made it to their recipients. “I needed some of the inmates to help me like write the letters and mail it. I didn't know how... you have to write your address in the corner of letters and stuff like that.” Similarly, Lamont’s early letters failed to arrive at their destination because he did not know how to properly address an envelope before someone taught him how to format the envelope correctly.

When Joel first learned how to write and send letters, he asked for help from “homies that sent letters before cause I didn't know how to do it. For sure, I didn't know how to do it.” He leaned on his peers for support due to his lack of experience with letters: “Out there you don't really use paper, you just use the phone so you don't really need to.” Joel had a vague memory of learning how to compose letters in school when he was younger, but that learning did not appear to stick with him. Letter writing at that time was an academic assignment, not something that applied to his day-to-day life; now, in this environment, letter writing has become integral to his incarcerated experience, and the learning related to this practice, taught by his peers, is something that he applies consistently.

As he continues to develop his literacy skills, Mario has relied on others to help him read and write his letters, and being enrolled in the school program gives him more access to support. Mario speaks both Spanish and English, and he receives letters written in both languages; however, he still has difficulty reading either. To read these, Mario brings them to class and has them read aloud to him by his neighbors in class, relying on them to help him comprehend and compose his letters; he primarily writes his letters himself, but he occasionally dictates them to

others to write on his behalf. Even for those he composes on his own, he utilizes someone else to address the envelope, stating, “I write the letter, fold it up, and ask somebody, one of my neighbors or a good friend or somebody, to put the name in the envelope. Cause I'm pretty sure they wouldn't understand my writing.” As he challenges himself to write his own letters, Mario knows that the letter reaching its recipient is vital, so he relies on the knowledge and skills of his peers to ensure his envelopes are correctly and legibly addressed.

One’s handwriting needs not only to be neat on the envelope but how it looks on the letter itself is highly valued by both writers and their recipients. To make letters visually special, participants discussed how they often ask others to add special handwriting or script on their letters, particularly the name of the recipient. As Mario explained, “First of all, her name needs to look unique on the letter. At least she'll save it for that. She ain't gonna wanna waste this regular writing... I think her name should be special writing before anything, you know.” Joel admittedly has bad handwriting, so he asks fellow inmates to share their skills, saying, “If there's a homie in there that knows how to do Old English or cursive, I'll ask him if he could, like, ‘Hey bro, you can write this on there for me?’” On the letter Joel provided for this study, he did just that, asking someone in the dorm to write his girlfriend’s name at the top of his letter:



Since participants consider their letters gifts for their recipients, making them special in this way adds value. On one occasion, Joel “had a person write my whole letter before, front and

back...I just put my rough draft down right there for him [and] he rewrote it for me. Gave it back to me.”

There is a high level of vulnerability in the sharing of letters, and Joel does not entrust it to everyone: “Not everybody in the dorm's good mentors, but there's a lot of homies that did, like, a lot of time in prison and some of them got better heads on their shoulders than others.” It is these peers that Joel relies on for support with his letters, not only for their artistic abilities but also for their knowledge. As he composes his letters, Joel often seeks out “older homies around in the dorm, and I'll ask them words or like, you know, definitions of words. Or they'll like—I'll ask them how to spell stuff sometimes.” As he is housed in the school dorm, all his peers are also his classmates, and he utilizes them as a resource from which he can develop his skills and refine his work.

### ***Teaching Others***

Some of the participants with more letter-writing experience—the “older homies,” as Joel may call them—spoke on helping those with less experience develop their writing skills. Edgar has taken on that role when asked, helping both youngsters new to letter writing and old-timers with poor literacy skills compose their letters, but he emphasized the need for them to learn how to do so on their own. “If they wanna learn, I'll do it,” he said, “but to go out of my way to teach them? Nah.” He played out the dialogue of how some of these interactions go between him and those who ask for assistance.

I've had people come over to me like, ‘Can you do me a favor?’ And I'll be like, ‘What?’ ‘Can you write my letter for me?’ Or they'll be like, ‘I'm gonna write, can you help me out?’ When it comes down to it, it's like, ‘Where's your letter you wanted to write?’ ‘Oh, no, no, no. I'm gonna tell you what to say.’

He expressed surprise at how frequently other incarcerated folks need assistance with their letters, both in reading the ones they receive or writing their own: “There's a lot of people, whether they're young or old...I thought they were playing, and they're like, ‘Hey, can you write a letter?’ and they don't know how to spell.” Recounting a time when someone asked him to read a letter they received, Edgar said, “I'll read it, and he'll like [ask], ‘What else does he say, what else does he say?’ And they're illiterate. They don't know how to read.” Edgar believes that even though letter writing is essential to navigating one’s incarceration—“You gotta do it,” he emphasizes—not all use the time to develop their practice or skills. Describing his experience helping others, he said, “You can lead the horse to water, but you can’t make him drink it.” Still, he knows that “even if they don’t wanna, people gotta learn how to write,” so he makes himself available to those who are willing to learn.

Ulysses, like Edgar, shares his knowledge with novice letter writers, particularly when it comes to the overarching goal or purpose of the letter. Ulysses incorporates what he has learned in former classes in his letter-writing process, specifically the idea of a thesis: “I learned how to write...through school, but I think maybe the approach, even though it wasn't directly meant for letters, it still affected the way I constructed everything in my mind before I even wrote it.”

Knowing the value of having a clear goal in mind while writing, Ulysses mentors other writers to approach their letters with intention when necessary:

Oftentimes, you'll see a guy sitting and say, ‘I gotta write a letter.’ ‘Well, what's the letter about?’ And they can't really tell you what the letter's about. Just like, ‘I need to write.’

And that's fine cause oftentimes maybe it's an emotional thing that they need to get out or that they're trying to convey, but perhaps they would, it would be better emotionally and



psychologically for them if they were able to identify what is the purpose and the reason for you writing this.

As someone who benefitted from the mentorship of others when he first arrived in jail and prison—mentors who steered him towards education and away from other goings-on—Ulysses offers to do the same to youngsters new to the system, hoping that the next generation will keep letter writing alive.

**Finding Six: Participants self-report improving their writing skills over time and show a determination to learn through their letter writing.**

This finding explores how letter writing, as an authentic literacy practice in the context of jail, provides participants with opportunities for increased literacy proficiency through their own self-study and continuous practice. Participants described actively learning through the letter-writing process, improving their skills over time, and identifying areas where they can continue to grow.

**“This is kind of a self-taught thing for the most part.”**

Participants expressed that their letter-writing process and overall writing skills developed through continuous practice over time. As Tyree said, his letter writing and belief in himself as a writer is “just getting better as I go.” While they lean on their peers for support for various components of their letters and incorporate skills learned in class, the growth that participants experience as writers and learners largely comes from their individual, independent practice. For Joel, whose primary form of communication on the outs was text messaging and social media, letters—and jail itself—have been a doorway to expanding his understanding, skills, and experience with literacy. When I asked in what areas he has improved because of his letter writing, Joel said:

Most definitely my vocabulary. Cause I didn't know how hard writing was. Like, when you text, it fixes everything for you—words, it shows you if a word is wrong—it'll automatically, 'Is this the word you're looking for?' 'Yes.' You know? Like [letters], you gotta be precise, cause there's no, like, 'Oh, maybe the word's like this or maybe it looks like this.' You gotta open up the dictionary. I opened up the dictionary for the first time cause of letters. It makes you read a lot. Well, I always read a lot, I like to read, but I really...started reading in jail; I didn't read books out there. So now I love to read. And now I like to write letters.

Joel was not the only participant to mention utilizing the dictionary frequently, with several participants explicitly mentioning that they use dictionaries and thesauruses to support their letter writing. To expand his vocabulary and better understand unfamiliar words, Freddy bought one of each to teach himself:

There was a lot of words I didn't know, so I bought myself a dictionary, a thesaurus, things like that. And I started, like, just learning like that myself. And that was getting me into more writing. Cause I had to learn how to write.

Ulysses “learned how to appreciate dictionaries” after only having “a little cheap dictionary” during his time in solitary confinement. As students, participants have access to these resources in the classroom, but some, like Josue, “always have a dictionary and thesaurus” at the ready.

Letters and letter writing while incarcerated served as the catalyst for Mario to take his illiteracy seriously. During our interview, Mario admitted, “I don't know how to really read and write;” he dropped out of school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and confessed that he was not able to write his own name correctly until he was 25 years old. While in prison, like several of the participants in this study, Mario spent time in the SHU—solitary confinement. It was there, with no access to

phones or visits, that Mario relied on letters as the only form of communication with his loved ones—at a cost—and what ultimately led to learning how to read and write his own.

I was in the SHU. I was grounded. And my neighbor used to be, my neighbor used to be know how to speak English and Spanish. So, we used to go over my letters, and he'll read 'em and he'll write it. So basically, my wife...fell in love with this letter stuff. And it was my neighbor that was writing to her. Not me. And that's how it went on. And I lost my wife in between that. Cause she was still writing to him. So, I kinda, like, got real angry and wanted to know how to learn how to read a little bit. So, I grabbed a book and was trying, trying. But I couldn't do it though. So, I got depressed and started throwing it all over the place. It was crazy. Then little by little I started grabbing it. My little sister sent like, school little books. And I got it. Little by little.

With a total of roughly 19 years spent incarcerated throughout his life, Mario stated that “this time I do my time, it's writing more.” He purposefully engages in the practice to further develop his skills:

Sometimes I don't even use the phone no more because I write a lot. And using the phone is kinda like makes this, gets me off of this [letter writing]. So, if I'm talking to you on the phone, what do I need to write a letter for? So, if I don't talk to you, then I want to say things, it gets me wanting to write.

It can take him up to two or three hours to compose a one-page letter, but he finds the practice of letter writing empowering. Where once he would “break [his] head a lot” trying to figure out how and what to write, letter writing now gives him “a little bit of hope and power; it gets me going, you know.” Mario speaks of this concept of learning through letters frequently, using the practice of letter writing to continuously improve his skills. Despite any challenges he may

experience, Mario maintains a positive view towards his literacy development and practices; when discussing different elements of literacy—handwriting, spelling, punctuation, or comprehension—he concludes his comments on these tasks with phrases like, “It works out, little by little” or “Once I can get that I'm gonna be alright. Then I'll move to the next one.” Even still, he takes responsibility for his development: “I feel like I shoulda been learned how to do this. For being dumb, it's my fault. It's my fault. I gotta get through it. I gotta past to get through this by myself.” This approach to literacy and learning is something that has developed over time. As a child in school, there was more teasing from the other students; here, as an adult in jail, he feels less embarrassed to ask for help, but is aware not to “bug them” too much.

### **Growth over Time**

David had a similar experience to Joel transitioning from text messaging to letter writing. For him, the learning is not only about the technical aspects of letter writing but also how to effectively communicate through that medium. Initially, “when I would actually write the letter, I would write it more like a text message... I'm used to that immediate response,” he said. His first letters were “just kinda vague.” Now, though, he goes “more in depth. I kinda explain more about my situation instead of just saying, ‘I'm fine,’ and that's it.” As he has grown more comfortable expressing himself through letter writing, David said he is “probably more upfront and honest in letters” than in other forms of communication; for him, finding his voice as a letter writer comes from his own continued practice. “I think the way I can improve will be to write more,” he said matter-of-factly.

The concept of improving through writing more was echoed by other participants. Josue's advice to young letter writers is simply that: “Just keep writing. That's what I tell, that's what I would tell everybody.” Reflecting on his own growth, Edgar identified that continued

practice has led to his improvement as a writer as well: “Just being repetitive, I got better at it...I’ve gotten better at writing than when I first started, from the first time I wrote a letter compared to now. I’ve gotten a lot better.” As he has gotten better at letter writing over the years, it was important for him to point out that he has remained who he is throughout: “The style, like, changed throughout my time...[but] it’s always been me.” His recent experience of going through his old letters at his mother’s house reinforced that belief: the recognition of growth over time while remaining his authentic self.

Freddy similarly reflected on how his letters have changed over time. Describing his early letters, he said, “They were really more ‘how are you doing, how I’m doing’... They were very short, they weren’t so much like details or nothing, like probably like how they might be now—how I would write now.” Using the phrase “how I would write now” signifies an awareness of his growth as a letter writer over time, contrasting it with the short and detail-less content of his early letters. He specified areas where he wants to grow and identified where he already has:

My grammar. Grammar, punctuation marks, things like that. Periods. Those things I believe I have a hard time. But not that I have a hard time, I just I feel like I need to improve on those things. Words, for the most part words, I just keep it basic, simple. I don’t try to use big ol’ words all the time. I always have a dictionary with me, so I’m always trying to do my best to make sure I write the words correctly...I believe my writing has improved. It’s improved. My spelling, for sure. My spelling has improved. It’s like I said, my grammar is probably my problem. But I just write it as is sometimes and I leave out, like, periods and things like that sometimes. And then, I have a problem writing capital letters, but I think it’s improved a lot.

Because he has been able to see growth over time, Freddy, like others, has been able to see and set goals for himself.

### **Future Writing Goals**

Participants recognized notable growth in their writing skills over time and pointed out specific areas in which they wanted to continue to improve. One of the most frequent goals was expanding their vocabulary. For many, utilizing dictionaries and thesauruses is a part of their letter-writing process; others spoke about picking up the practice themselves. Lamont plans to use his time inside to improve his vocabulary: “I want to start using the dictionary so I can elaborate my words. I haven't really took my time out there to do it.” On the streets, Lamont never thought to use a dictionary—or even communicate without technology—but now that letter writing is a practice he engages in frequently, he wants to “find bigger words, better meanings, stuff like that,” to incorporate into his letters.

Like Lamont, Derrick hopes to grow his vocabulary to support his specific approach to letter writing. With his method of personalization, Derrick is always trying to find the right word to set the “mood” for his letters to his girlfriend: “The mood, it's hard. That's probably the hardest part for me, is thinking of the mood, like the right word for the mood. I should buy, like, a thesaurus or something.” He acknowledges that he survived a unique experience that makes language acquisition hard for him:

I was shot in the head, bro. So, a lot of things I can't remember, you know? Like, or I be, I forget a lot of things. Or I fail to recall them. So, what I could work on is the, just reading a bunch of words and try to commit them to memory. Or write them down somewhere so that I can use [them]... Something I would do in the future is probably try to find strong words instead of using—I hate using the same words twice... Sometimes

after I write a letter, I won't even remember what the fuck I was saying in that letter. But I know my girl will remember...that's all that really matters.

Derrick's goal of expanding his vocabulary directly relates to his letter writing and, ultimately, the effect his letters have on his girlfriend.

Joel, who "opened up the dictionary for the first time cause of letters," considers expanding his vocabulary one of his main goals as well. He wants to write to different audiences, recognizing that not everyone may understand how he writes; he uses the portmanteau "splang"—Spanish slang—to describe how he uses language:

Yeah, I want to expand my vocabulary and use bigger words that I don't use because where I live at, we just speak in splang. Like, everything's a shorter version of everything. Like we say words that mean something to probably you, but that means something else for us. So, other people don't talk like this, so I'm kinda—not everybody lives where I live at, so...I try to change my vocabulary when I'm talking to my family or, like, other people that's probably not gonna understand what I'm saying, so I'm trying to use real words, I'm trying to learn how to use real words.

Joel is not trying to erase or replace how he uses language; he wants to broaden his ability to communicate with others. Because participants occasionally write to more formal or professional audiences—their lawyers, their judge, rehabilitation programs, etc.—knowing how to write to and for specific audiences is something Joel and others want to work towards.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented findings from 12 interviews with incarcerated adult students concerning their letter-writing practices and experiences. Whether new to the medium out of necessity or continuing a long-standing practice borne from years inside, the participants in this

study shared how vital letter writing is to their carceral experience. Letters allow them to express themselves fully to others, giving them an outlet to share personal, vulnerable, and complex components of themselves—aspects that, if made public in this environment, may risk reputation and safety. The letter-writing process is an activity that promotes deep thinking, giving participants a means to make sense of their experience, surroundings, and themselves. Compared to the other modes of communication in jail, phone calls, and visits, letters provide their writers with opportunities to say the unsaid by discussing topics they would otherwise avoid and be heard by their recipients in the process. Participants consider the letters they compose as gifts for their loved ones on the outside, and they utilize unique strategies to personalize each letter to make them special. They value the tangibility of letters, how their writing leaves a legacy, a literal paper trail, of their history, memory, and existence. As students, these participants describe how they utilize the resources available to them to support their authentic letter-writing practice and how, through this primarily self-taught practice, they have grown as writers and learners.

The following chapter will discuss key findings and their significance in greater detail.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Jail is hard—this one, in this county, specifically. “Harder than prison,” my students tell me, which, given the infamy of the California prison system, is saying something. It does not matter if you are innocent or guilty, young or old, White, Black, Brown, or other. Jail is hard. Unless doing state time in the county or down from prison on appeal, incarcerated folks in jail have yet to be sentenced, meaning they are either fighting their case, in trial, or awaiting sentencing. Maybe they make bail, maybe they win their case, maybe they go home. Or maybe they go to prison or a treatment program. In prison, at least, you know your time: four years with half, 10 to 15 years, life without the possibility of parole. Jail, however, is a type of purgatory; their fate is unknown and out of their control, and that can be overwhelming.

Explaining their day-to-day experiences, my students taught me these lessons, distilled above, early in my time as a jailhouse teacher. The stakes for these students are quite literally life or death. For a teacher to ignore these incarcerated folks’ reality, with its ever-present threat of violence, abandonment, and loss of dignity, is ignorant at best, dangerous at worst. No one can really prepare you for teaching inside a jail. However, my students have done a good job, and I keep their reality and lived experiences—both before and during their incarceration—at the forefront of my mind and in my approach to the classroom.

I told that first group of students I wanted to construct the classroom to be what they needed it to be for themselves—as long as the work got done. I was attempting to create a space where students could feel comfortable showing up authentically and use the classroom as an opportunity to grow and define success for themselves in their own way. For some, it was simply making it to class in the morning after a long day at court; for others, it was completing a course

to earn a milestone and one week off their sentence. But for many, the invitation to make the classroom experience both positive and productive meant using the space to read and respond to letters. As I would float around the classroom and help students with their work, some of those writing letters would ask, “Hey, how do you spell this word,” or “Does a comma go here,” or “Does what I’m trying to say make sense?” Each question became an opportunity for authentic learning to occur, and I would use the opportunity to turn their question into a mini-lesson for the class. What they were learning was not for the purposes of passing a test or course to earn credits toward their diploma, it was to apply it in their daily lives outside of the classroom. These men composed love letters, get-to-know-you letters, break-up letters, letters to the judge, and pleas to their children, siblings, and parents; they were so absorbed in that process that it was impossible to ignore how much these letters meant to these students. I was honored that they trusted me enough to share their writing, their insecurities as learners, and themselves in such real and vulnerable ways. As an educator, it was important for me to better understand how important letter writing is to my students in this context so that I can informatively and respectfully support their growth as learners and men; thus, this study.

I was and continue to be fascinated by students’ dedication to letter writing. Yes, the context calls for it: writing letters is one of three ways of communicating and connecting with the outside world, in addition to phone calls and visits. And no, not every incarcerated person writes letters. But for those who do, they are carrying on a tradition of handwritten communication, a practice that goes back millennia, and are doing so within the context of jails and prisons, which has its own rich literary history.

Communicating through letters is “dead” in contemporary society (Stanley, 2015), the practice having long been replaced by electronic and instantaneous means, and the elimination of

handwritten letters is becoming more prevalent within correctional facilities across the state and country. Sheriff Luna of Los Angeles County, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times in December 2023, supported that the county's jails shift in that direction:

I envision—and I'm already working on this—all of our custody facilities getting really good internet service so that I can get tablets in and eliminate mail. Can you imagine if I can give a family the ability to FaceTime, what that would do? There's so many opportunities. (Blakinger, 2023)

Being able to video chat with loved ones would transform the experience of incarcerated individuals in Los Angeles County, no question. And there are security and safety reasons that make eliminating mail appealing; the risk of drugs, contraband, and coded messages circulating through the mail system in jails and prisons is very real, and the safety of incarcerated folks, county personnel, and outside vendors is paramount. But as the findings from this study show, letters play a vital role in the lives of incarcerated individuals, and while incorporating video communication, email, or text messaging through tablets is undoubtedly beneficial in many ways, there is something lost if letter writing dies out or is eliminated. The human element and legacy of letters as tangible artifacts carry such importance for these men, and it would be a shame for the practice to diminish within carceral culture. There is already a lamentation by the older generation of participants in this study who recognize a loss of writing skills and overall letter production by the younger generation, but the youngsters in this study show that when they engage in the practice, letters are immensely valuable to the development of their literacy skills and self.

## **Study Purpose**

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of letter writing as practiced by incarcerated adult students enrolled in a high school diploma program. Twelve participants were involved in this study, which included an in-person, semi-structured interview and a self-selected, handwritten letter provided by the participants. The study explored how incarcerated adult students experience their letter-writing practices, focusing on the role that letter writing plays in students' lives, their unique composition processes and products, their beliefs about themselves and their skills as writers, and the assets and strategies they use in this literacy practice. The insight, honesty, and vulnerability shared by these participants, both in the interviews and through their personal letters, provide a glimpse into a unique phenomenon—letter writing—in an understudied context—jail. In this chapter, I summarize and discuss the key findings of the study,

## **Significance and Discussion of Key Findings**

Not since Maybin's (2000, 2006, 2011) research, which focused on the meaning of letters for death row inmates and their "penfriends," and Wilson's (2000a) study exploring the visual impact of letters for incarcerated individuals in the United Kingdom, has there been an in-depth exploration of the practice of letter writing in the lives of incarcerated folks. Most of the research since has dealt with using prison letters as artifacts for data collection and how these letters can support further correctional research (Bosworth et al., 2005; Jewkes, 2012; Vannier, 2016, 2020). This study uses letters in conjunction with interviews, allowing the two data collection methods to support and complement one other. Vannier (2016) noted that using prison letters as data can be misinterpreted and misunderstood, stating that "the researcher is unable to address any query on the spot as could be done in a face-to-face interview" (p.108). This study avoids that hurdle

by having the interviewee explicate their letter themselves during the interview, with protocol questions tailored for that process. Participants, when describing their letter-writing practices and process, could reference the letters they contributed to the study, synthesizing their experience in real time. To my knowledge, no other study has utilized this approach or had this type of access, making this study's research methodology significant.

This study contributes to the overall body of research on corrections, educational research in correctional settings, and literacy among incarcerated individuals. The study builds on the work of Maybin and Wilson, focusing on the role that letters play in the lives of incarcerated individuals in a contemporary context; it expands on their work by providing a better understanding of the practices, strategies, and assets involved during composition and the value inherent in that act. The findings reveal that letter writing plays a vital role in participants' lives during their incarceration, providing them an opportunity to express themselves and make sense of their experience, helping them better communicate and maintain relationships with their loved ones, and supporting their literacy and academic development. The following sections summarize and discuss the key findings in this study.

### **RQ1a: The role of letter writing in participants' lives**

The findings that explore the role letter writing plays in the lives of these participants richly describe the value that incarcerated individuals place on letters and the letter-writing process. Throughout the history of carceral culture, letters have played a vital role in the lives of incarcerated individuals and their families. This importance is understandable when we consider that letter writing was the primary form of written communication for thousands of years (Barton & Hall, 2000), but within our contemporary experience, it may be easier to assume that the letter is dead (Stanley, 2015). While this may be so for most of the population in the outside world,

letter writing is a lifeline for those inside. The experiences, thoughts, and feelings shared by the participants in this study provide a present-day reminder of the power of letters and their essential role in incarcerated individuals' lives.

Most of these participants had no prior experience with letter writing before their incarceration, either as a juvenile or adult, and those who did were either from an older generation or in communication with someone who was incarcerated themselves. This initial finding reveals that letter writing is uniquely tied to the carceral system both practically and culturally. There is an acceptance that letter writing is a component of being incarcerated, and incarcerated individuals understand that these letters and the composition process are highly valuable in several ways.

Participants revealed that, at times, corresponding through letters is the only way to communicate with their loved ones. This is true in both a practical and larger, more complex sense. As Josue explained, phone calls and visits are privileges, but letters are a right—one of the few incarcerated folks have while inside; even those labeled as indigent are provided envelopes and stamps by the facility. Even if phone calls are taken away and visits restricted for disciplinary reasons, sending and receiving letters are still permitted. Participants explained that a common punishment for violating jail rules is being sent to the hole, a type of jail-within-jail where they are housed in isolation with restricted movement and access. In this scenario, only letters are permitted, and multiple participants expressed how their letter-writing practice began and developed during this time. Those with prison experience explained how they had spent time—even years and decades—in solitary confinement, relying on letters the entire time; there was one stretch where Ulysses did not speak on the phone for 10 years, his loved ones not recognizing his voice when he was finally able to call them.

Letter writing not only functions as practical communication, but also as a medium through which the writer can express themselves fully, discuss difficult topics, and be heard in the process. Within carceral culture, men are often expected to be a “hard body,” as Lamont described it, keeping their emotions inside while presenting a tough exterior. Letter writing allows them to remove their façade and communicate honestly and vulnerably with their recipient. This is something that they may not feel comfortable doing on the phone, where other men in the dorm may be watching and listening, or in visits, where face-to-face communication may be both overwhelming and impersonal. Letters can be composed privately, allowing incarcerated individuals to share their thoughts and emotions confidentially and work through that process on their own terms.

Letter writing provides an opportunity for incarcerated individuals to have difficult conversations as well. Some participants expressed that some things cannot be said over the phone for fear of being overheard, such as being sweet or apologizing to your girlfriend, while others broached cathartic topics, such as Freddy’s conversation with his abusive father, that had been living within them for months or years. Ultimately, letters allow these men to be heard—to communicate without being interrupted, distracted, or shut down—and to reach their audience. I recall Roberto’s quip, “I said it,” remembering a difficult topic he addressed. The simple act of putting that feeling on paper, knowing that the words would at least be read, provided Roberto with peace of mind, knowing that he was able to say his piece. Josue best sums up the recognition: “All we have in here is our word;” letter writing is a way of concretizing that insight.

### **RQ1b: The letter-writing process**

In addition to building upon previous research on the value of letters in the lives of incarcerated individuals, this study uniquely explores their letter-writing processes, providing insight into the multiple assets they bring and strategies they employ in their practice, regardless of educational experience or literacy level. For many, when one imagines “letter writing,” the image of the solitary letter writer, alone at their desk, composing their personal correspondence by hand, comes to mind (Barton & Hall, 2000). Their description, while a semi-true, if romanticized, image of time past, is far from the logistical writing experience of these participants in 2024, with some notable jailhouse swappings taking place.

Participants painted vivid images of what the act of letter writing looks like for them, describing how they have to find space on their metal bunks in search of a private, hard surface to write their letters. If not there, they write on one of the few shared tables in the dorm, forgoing privacy in the process. In an ideal scenario, as Ulysses described it, participants find time to write in the classroom, free from the many distractions in their living space. Rather than using a pen or full-sized pencil, these participants describe having to use short, golf pencils that require frequent sharpening. In the likely scenario that the mechanical sharpener in the dorm is unavailable, participants take to using their miniature shaving razor to whittle the pencil down or, as I have seen, filing it on the floor, wall, or other hard surface to sharpen the lead. Again, the classroom plays a role here as the access to a sharpener and new pencils supports their extracurricular writing.

Participants describe their writing process in one of two ways, either writing “in one take” or through multiple drafts and edits, working towards a “final product” over time, with both processes serving the letter writer in different ways. The “straight through” approach,



depending on the experience of the letter writing, the content of the letter, and the recipient, can take anywhere from a few minutes to several hours, with the letter functioning as an extension of their authentic self, blemishes and all. In this approach, less attention is paid to grammatical or spelling mistakes, with one participant, Josue, taking pride in his writing errors as genuine representations of himself—any corrections to his writing would be a correction of him. For some, minimal editing may be done—the squeezing in of a missing word or letter, as Freddy does—but there is no extensive rewriting for a final draft. Ulysses described how writing in an uninterrupted flow allows him to share his thoughts in the moment and that going back and editing his letters takes away from the specialness; for him and others, letters are a written snapshot of time, thought, and feeling, with the idea that you can never recapture a moment. This approach to letter writing, as well as the letters themselves, functions as a way for participants to express themselves authentically and as a means to make the internal external.

The second approach, composing a letter over time, edit by edit and draft by draft, supports participants' sensemaking of themselves and their experience. Letters allow participants to get thoughts and feelings outside themselves and on the page, and there is value in being able to “peep the whole thing,” as Joel described it. Once these vulnerabilities are laid out, some participants described finding ways to work with these emotions and thoughts, make sense of them, and ultimately convey these complexities accurately and in a way that makes sense to their recipient. By composing a letter over time—up to two weeks—participants get to craft their work and imbue it with meaning; participants new to letter writing described a contrast between the immediacy and ease of texting with the process and weight of letter writing. Rather than capturing a moment, as Ulysses described it, participants who write over time can work through their own experience, whatever it may be, and share its totality. Derrick, for example, discussed

writing multiple letters—rough drafts, essentially—before working up to what he really wanted to write and say to his recipient, giving them insight and access to his thought and writing process.

Regardless of approach, participants never write their letters in a vacuum. Even when writing alone, they are constantly affected by the context of their environment (Barton & Hall, 2000; Perry, 2012). In many ways, the participants composed their letters with an awareness of this fact, utilizing their circumstances for their benefit. A few participants, recounting their early letters, asked their peers and even jail staff how to properly address an envelope to ensure arrival after learning first letters never reached their destination. Those with no or little experience with letter writing sought out the knowledge of others regarding how to even compose letters in the first place, often relying on “older homies” to do so. While few participants described sharing their letters in full with their peers, mostly using others as a stand-in dictionary or thesaurus, they did describe incorporating the artistic skills of their peers to help personalize their letters, using stylized handwriting or drawings to make their letters special for their recipient; Joel described a time where he had a peer transcribe an entire letter in cursive.

When not seeking the support of peers for their letters, participants, as students, utilized the classroom and its resources to aid in the writing process. Those who described writing their letters in class spoke on having access to dictionaries, thesauruses, and other reference materials to ensure the proper spelling or word choice for their letters. Many participants mentioned always carrying a dictionary for that purpose, but the classroom functioned as a quiet space where writing and thinking could occur. Tyree found the classroom as a site of inspiration, incorporating discussions and content from class into his letters and extracurricular writing. Freddy spoke about paying close attention to how his teachers talk, listening for familiar and

unfamiliar words that he could look up and use in his own writing. The classroom, as a type of thirdspace that blends elements of the free world and those of the carceral world, provides participants with access to resources that non-student incarcerated folks do not have, and the participants, aware of this privilege, purposefully use them to their benefit when composing their letters.

### **RQ1c: Views of themselves as writers**

Even though these participants are or were recently enrolled in the high school diploma program, signifying that they fall into the category of roughly 30% of the incarcerated population without a high school degree (Cai et al., 2019), most viewed themselves, their writing skills, and the letters they produce positively and confidently. This is not to say that participants were not realistic or critical of various components of their writing, primarily their use or misuse of grammar, punctuation, spelling, or the visual aspects of their handwriting; instead, they described these shortcomings as challenges that they have or are working to overcome. There was a general sense of pride in themselves and in their work, regardless of letter-writing experience; those new to the practice found satisfaction in their transition from texting to letter writing, and those with extensive experience reflected on their writing development and output of letters with reverence. Participants showed an awareness of their growth over time, proud of the fact that letter writing skills and practices are something that has been primarily self-taught. They themselves took an asset-based approach to their own letter-writing practice, recognizing that they have seen significant growth through repetition, working with others, and incorporating skills they have learned in school.

Joel's experience and description of his letter-writing practice are representative of many participants' views about themselves, letter-writing, and their development. Discussing his letter-

writing practice, Joel said, “I never really seen myself as a writer, to be honest. I just feel like I'm just expressing myself on paper. Cause I never wrote a book, or I never did nothing like that. I'm just trying to communicate.” This notion that certain types of writing are valued more than others is common among the participants and, I would argue, by outside writing programs and workshops that are brought inside; letters are simply communication, but novels, memoirs, screenplays, poems, lyrics, or anything composed for school are *real* writing. “I could never write a book or an essay, I was never good at that,” Joel said, but when I asked him in what areas he has grown because of his letter writing, Joel said,

Most definitely my vocabulary. Cause I didn't know how hard writing was. Like, when you text, it fixes everything for you...It'll automatically, ‘Is this the word you're looking for?’ ‘Yes.’ You know? Like this [letter], you gotta be precise...You gotta open up the dictionary. I opened up the dictionary for the first time cause of letters. It makes you read a lot...I started reading in jail, I didn't read books out there. So now I love to read. And now I like to write letters.

Despite not “seeing [him]self as a writer,” Joel recognizes that his writing skills have improved because of letters, and his overall experience with literacy has developed as a result of his incarceration. Joel’s experience here provides a well-rounded example exemplifying that of others: despite any shortcomings or lack of previous experience with writing, Joel continues to compose letters, developing his skills in the process, and he recognizes the benefits that this practice provides him.

The participants in this study detailed in-depth, unique letter-writing processes and practices that were entirely self-motivated and developed within the context of their incarceration. The participants in this study have a wide range of abilities, strategies, and assets

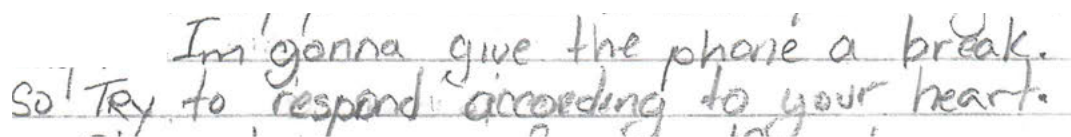
they bring to this practice, and despite their lack of formal education, they believe in themselves and their capacity for growth as letter writers. While the genre of prison literature elevates certain types of writings as worthy of the title—poetry, memoirs, famous letters written by famous men—and there are countless writing programs that come from the outside to work with incarcerated folks inside (though not at this facility), the findings from this study show that the everyday letters written by incarcerated folks of all skill levels are worth recognizing and celebrating.

### **RQ2: The descriptions of letters and letters themselves**

One of the most significant components of this study was participants providing one of their personal letters as data. As previously stated, while letters have been previously used in contemporary prison research (Bosworth et al., 2005; Maybin, 2000; Vannier, 2016, 2022; Wilson, 2000a, 2000b, 2011), no study, to my knowledge, has used both interviews and letters in conjunction with one another in real-time. The goal of this data collection method was to help participants have a concrete sample they could refer to when discussing their letter-writing practices, their composition process, and the impact of letters in their lives. By referencing a recently written letter, participants could have something to speak on in the present rather than relying on the abstract concept or memories of their letters. The letters themselves supported the major findings from the study as they were manifestations of the experiences described by participants.

Exemplary of how essential letters are to the participants and how these letters function as unique forms of data, Roberto's letter to his wife—asking whether to continue their marriage after he had recently been sentenced to life in prison—is worth discussing. The content of Roberto's letter, a conversation that had been weighing on him for a long time, was not

something he felt he could have over the phone; he was concerned with not being heard, and he wanted to use this medium through which both he and his wife could process and articulate their thoughts and feelings. Is his letter perfectly written and error-free? From a stuffy, rote academic standard, no. But Roberto's letter reveals multiple assets that many writers—myself included—strive for: a clear voice, vulnerability, a keen awareness of audience, and, unique to this context, a trust in the power of letters. Roberto has been writing jail and prison letters to his wife for the past 25 years; this correspondence has largely shaped his voice and their relationship, and he relies on letters to discuss difficult and vulnerable topics. At one point in the letter he provided for this study, Roberto writes,



Im gonna give the phone a break.  
So I try to respond according to your heart.

This reveals a trust in letters to deliver his message by forgoing phone calls and an ask of his wife to do what he did—communicate “according to your heart.” Here, on these handwritten pages composed in jail, the past, present, and future of a marriage is contained. Roberto's interview, containing a wealth of data in which he articulated what letters and writing mean to him, would have been incomplete without having this letter to support his responses. All the letters, in some form or another, provided this extra depth that complemented the interviews, and I would suggest that these letters, “old school texts” as Ulysses called them, contain as many multitudes and complexities as the letter writers themselves.

### **Limitations**

Given the challenges of conducting research in correctional facilities, the limitations in this study are related to collecting in-depth data within the setting and context of corrections. My role as an educator at LACJ afforded me access; I already had security clearance and strong

professional relationships with and support from the sheriff's department staff, which made this study possible. Still, I was only granted permission to conduct this study at my work facility, limiting the study to only one site.

As this study focused on the letter-writing practices of incarcerated students, the pool of potential participants was limited to individuals enrolled in the education program. Sixty-five individuals were contacted through a recruitment letter, and 49 expressed interest in participating. Twelve participants were selected, four of whom were students enrolled across two of my classes. The single interview and single required letter (although one student provided multiple writings) potentially limited the collection of in-depth data, even as the two data sources complemented and supported the other.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Educators**

Understanding the importance of letter writing for incarcerated individuals provides correctional educators numerous opportunities to promote authentic and contextually relevant learning, especially when nearly 70% of incarcerated students report that their in-custody studies are irrelevant to their daily lives (Patterson, 2018). Based on the findings from this study, letter writing, while no longer a primary form of communication in the free world, is still highly prevalent and valued in carceral spaces; as such, intentionally incorporating letter writing into the classroom may support incarcerated students' holistic and literacy development. This study is one step in recognizing the skills and authentic practices that incarcerated students bring with them to the classroom, and I recommend that correctional educators continually and creatively find ways to recognize and validate the knowledge their students possess.

***Recognize and build upon incarcerated students' funds of knowledge.***

Adult students enter the classroom with a wealth of knowledge and experience; incarcerated adult students bring an even more unique trove that includes what they have learned during their incarceration. All of this adds to one's funds of knowledge (FoK)—the skills, knowledge, and resources belonging to and embedded in students and their families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). This concept is grounded in the idea that these experiences are inseparable from life conditions (Rodriguez-Arocho, 2020), and for individuals in correctional facilities, their incarceration is a unique life condition that provides opportunities for new knowledges to develop. For some, it is a new artistic skill; numerous students in my classes throughout the years taught themselves how to draw, shade, and write in stylized fonts during their incarceration—Josue is one such example in this study. Others improve their numeracy skills by budgeting the money on their books or calculating how much an individual owes for their share of a spread (a jail-made meal). This study and its findings reveal that letter writing is also one of those jail-taught learnings; participants report that their letter writing either began or significantly developed while they were incarcerated, and they primarily improved in this practice independently or with the help of their peers.

Incarcerated students in ABE/ASE programs are often judged from a deficit-minded perspective; they dropped or were kicked out of school, they were involved in the juvenile system, they are criminals, they lack basic literacy or numeracy skills, etc. Frequently, these students are judged by what they do not know rather than what they do, or that the knowledge and lived experiences of justice-involved individuals are only relevant to criminality, gangbanging, or any other negative trope. Huerta and Rios-Aguilar (2021) explored these “funds of gang knowledge,” recognizing that these experiences—and realities—cannot be ignored by



educators and should be utilized to support their students. Instead of viewing these students as lacking, correctional education programs and educators themselves should work to better understand the skills and knowledge that their students do have and capitalize on them. For instance, Harrison (2022) explored funds of knowledge regarding mathematics with incarcerated youth in a juvenile school, noting that their experience with selling drugs was helpful in contextualizing and teaching fractions and decimals. This FoK, asset-based perspective towards incarcerated individuals can be adopted by all correctional educators, not only in programs for justice-involved youth, where there is still hope for change and transformation, or in post-secondary programs, where the belief is that these individuals are only missing the opportunity for education, not the skills required to be successful.

The findings from this study show how incarcerated students, even without higher levels of formal education, engage in the complex literacy practice of letter writing and the multiple strategies they use to do so. These elements—finding and sharing their authentic voice, a keen sense of audience awareness, and creative personalization—reveal unique skill sets that have grown during and because of their incarceration. Not only do these findings reveal skill-based development, but they also show a strong personal investment in this practice. Using these findings about letter writing as a starting point, I recommend that correctional educators continuously work to discover their students' other skills and knowledge and co-create their classrooms from an asset-based foundation.

***Construct learning objectives and outcomes relevant to incarcerated students' day-to-day lives.***

By incorporating incarcerated students' funds of knowledge into the classroom, correctional educators can provide content and learning opportunities that incarcerated folks can incorporate into their lives during their incarceration, not just after it. In the pragmatic model of

correctional education, the goal of providing educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals is future-oriented, concerned with increasing academic and employment opportunities post-release and reducing recidivism (Dewey & Prohaska, 2021). I wholeheartedly believe in these goals and promote them myself in the classroom, but there is a tendency to focus on personal, professional, and academic *future* outcomes for our incarcerated students; it is also imperative to support the interests, goals, and practices of these students in the *present*, i.e. during their incarceration.

The quantitative data from the 2014 PIAAC Prison Study provides insight into the literacy practices of incarcerated individuals: 82.5% of incarcerated individuals report writing letters at least once a week or every day (compared to 73.9% of the household population), and 80% report reading books, both fiction and nonfiction, at the same frequency (compared to just 59.4% of the household population) (Cai et al., 2019). Incarcerated individuals engage in these literacy activities independently, at higher rates than those on the outside, and cite that their main motivation to enroll in school while incarcerated is to gain knowledge and skills in a subject of interest (Rampey et al., 2016). Despite this eagerness to learn, only 29.3% of incarcerated students enrolled in educational programs report being able to relate what they learn to their everyday lives (Patterson, 2018). Given the frequency with which incarcerated individuals write letters and read books, I recommend that correctional educators tailor their instruction toward targeted skills and content relevant to their incarcerated students' day-to-day lives. Incarcerated students are looking for direct application, and with the prevalence of letter writing in the lives of incarcerated students, tailoring instruction towards the skills involved in this practice can be a starting point.

As many of the participants discussed in our interviews, incarcerated individuals experience time differently than folks on the streets and even in relation to their contemporaries on the inside. As Josue explained,

When you're looking at 100 years to life, it's a whole different experience, you know.

There's a lot of guys here crying over 90 days. And I get it cause that's their reality. And they didn't do what I did, and I didn't do what they did.

Some of the participants in this study are looking at years and decades in prison or have already experienced that time; others, including Josue, may not or will not ever be released back into the free world or will die in prison: “I don’t have a release date till I’m out [dead],” he matter-of-factly said. For the participants in this study, reducing their risk of recidivism through education is not the goal. Their immediate focus is surviving their incarceration in the present and preparing for an unknown future either back in society or in prison. These findings reveal that letter writing helps make their carceral experience more manageable through the mental, emotional, relational, and educational benefits they experience. I recommend that correctional educators focus on supporting growth in these areas through appropriate, tailored, and relevant curriculum and instruction.

***Utilize letter writing as an entry to literacy and self-development.***

In a practical way to tie the previous recommendations together, correctional educators can incorporate letter writing directly into their classroom to utilize authentic and contextually relevant learning opportunities, building on students’ funds of knowledge, and providing content and skills that students can use in their everyday lives. A few participants discussed how they ventured into other genres of writing, like Tyree, who proudly shares his poetry and hopes to compose a book one day; Derrick, who writes raps; and Freddy, who composed a singular poem

for his wife after years of writing letters. Most participants, however, would likely describe themselves as Joel did: “I never really seen myself as a writer, to be honest. I just feel like I'm just expressing myself on paper. Cause I never wrote a book or I never did nothing like that. I'm just trying to communicate.” I argue, and the findings from this study show, that these participants are writers through their letter-writing practice, and letters, as a type of parent genre for all others (Bazerman, 2000), contain the potential for further literacy development and exploration.

While this study does not propose any specific curriculum or classroom integration, some basic letter-influenced activities can be beneficial. A simple approach may be to designate a block of class for personal writing, providing students with a space to write their letters free from the distractions of their housing location. Participants reported that they often find time during class to work on their personal letters after completing their assignments for the day or, occasionally, instead of working on their assignments, so blocking off time during class would simply respond to this practice. In the classroom, with access to resources such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and other materials, students can craft their letters with focus and support. Teachers can also be available as an objective resource, answering questions, proofreading when asked, or aiding appropriately. Providing space in the school day to intentionally recognize the students' writing practices, rather than simply offering decontextualized content and instruction, may also validate students' carceral experience and promote positive associations with school and education.

Other skills-based, practical approaches teachers can incorporate may be to utilize letters, rather than out-of-context worksheets or activities, to improve basic grammar and writing skills, making challenging, often foreign concepts more understandable through a familiar medium.

Famous letters, sample letters, or, even better, student-produced letters can be used as teaching tools for simple or complex tasks. Since incarcerated students are accustomed to the structure and purpose of letters, using them as a format for written responses, prompts, or essays may be a method that is less daunting for students returning to school; writing an argumentative essay may be intimidating for some, but a letter, because of its familiarity, maybe less so. Daily letter-writing activities—to be mailed or not—can provide opportunities for engagement and growth. “

For deeper, more complex approaches, educators can use letter writing to help students explore their unique writing voice, practice writing for specific audiences, or as a therapeutic exercise. Extensive research recognizes the curative qualities of letter writing (Andrews et al., 1997; Constantin, 2019; Epston, 2009; Hartman, 1990; Prasko et al., 2009; Tadros et al., 2024; Voskanova, 2015), something the participants in this study and the resulting findings support. While letter writing as self-help may be a novel exercise for folks on the outside, likely due to the decline in written correspondence (Tadros et al., 2024), this practice is embedded in the lives of incarcerated folks, and daily letter-writing activities—to be mailed or not—can provide opportunities for engagement and growth. Letter writing can bring up complex emotions, and being able to work through them in writing and in a safe setting can be valuable (Keenan et al., 2014; Tadros et al., 2024; Voskanova, 2015). Prompts that focus on mental health struggles, loss of loved ones (or, in this context, freedom), and other complex experiences can give incarcerated students an outlet that they may not explore on their own (Lander & Graham-Pole, 2009; Larsen, 2022; Tadros et al., 2024). In writing-as-therapy exercises, the notion that “whatever you write is right” and that “you can’t write the wrong thing,” a concept shared by Hunt and Sampson (1998) in their book exploring creative writing as a therapeutic exercise (Wandor, 2002, p. 112), may reinforce to low-literate students with less than a high school diploma that their writing is

valuable and beneficial, regardless of the knowledge or following of grammatical rules, usage, and mechanics. Incarcerated individuals know all too well the power of letters; by incorporating and validating their authentic practice in the classroom, educators can support their students' personal growth and development in addition to their educational and communicative pursuits.

### **Recommendations for Researchers**

As letter writing has waned in practice and popularity in contemporary society, so too has the research in this area among literacy researchers. As I combed through the existing research on letter writing for this study, I found most to be conducted last century or already outdated; much of the current relevant research cited dated studies, something of frequent concern for my own evidence and citations. While I do not expect there to be a renaissance of letter-writing research (unless led by some jail educator-turned-researcher), some targeted areas of recommendations may be worth pursuing: research writ large on jails and the individuals imprisoned there; qualitative research that captures the experiences and humanity of incarcerated individuals enrolled in adult basic and secondary education programs, specifically research approaches that involve the participants themselves; and further research on the writing practices and skills of incarcerated individuals with a particular focus on the growing influence and prevalence of the use of technology in correctional facilities.

#### ***Conduct more research in general on jails and the incarcerated individuals there.***

Most of the research on corrections focuses on prisons at the state and federal levels; there is significantly less research on jails (Montagnet et al., 2021). A first, largescale recommendation would be to conduct more research on jails and the individuals incarcerated there be conducted in general. This dearth in research largely has to do with numbers; prisons are much larger, with roughly twice as many individuals incarcerated in prisons than jails, but more

people are admitted to jails annually. According to the most recent data, the average daily population of state and federal prisons nationally is 1,230,142 compared to 664,800 in jails; however, annual admissions in prisons is 469,217 compared to 7,627,000 in jail. (Bureau of Justice Statistics et al., 2023; *Preliminary Data Release - Jails 2023 | Bureau of Justice Statistics*, n.d.). So, while the daily average is higher in prisons, jails have a broader reach yearly, affecting roughly 2% of the U.S. population directly and a vastly higher percentage indirectly. Jails imprison a particularly vulnerable population, even among incarcerated individuals, “often with lower socioeconomic status, physical or mental health problems, and substance dependence; compounded with a high turnover rate that results from being released back to the community or transferred to prison, collecting and reporting data about this population is particularly challenging (Montagnet et al., 2021). These challenges, though, reveal why conducting research with incarcerated folks in jail in general and qualitative research specifically is necessary to support the needs of incarcerated individuals and criminal justice researchers, reformers, and advocates, as well as correctional staff, educators, and healthcare workers.

***Conduct more qualitative research with incarcerated individuals enrolled in educational programs.***

The most widely reported research on literacy amongst incarcerated individuals is quantitative in nature. Though dated, quantitative studies, such as the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) Prison Survey and the 2014 PIACC Prison Literacy study, have been vital to understanding the reality of the educational and literacy levels of the incarcerated population in the United States as a whole; quantitative methods are undeniably the best way to capture this breadth. While vital to supporting and developing correctional education programs, these large-scale studies present only one methodological approach to the complexities and

realities of incarcerated individuals' literacy development and practices. Jewkes and Treadwell (2019), discussing the state of ethnographic studies in carceral research, noted that qualitative research in jails and prisons in the United States is conducted much less frequently than in the United Kingdom and Europe due to limited access and the undervaluation of qualitative research overall in the US. With quantitative studies, there is the constant concern that statistics reduce individuals to numbers, and in an environment and context where that practice is quite literal—where a booking number can replace one's name—I recommend conducting more qualitative research in ABE/ASE programs in correctional facilities.

I suggest that these qualitative studies involve incarcerated individuals in the research process; participatory action research (PAR) may be one such methodology. Harrison (2022) called for more youth participatory action research (YPAR) after working with juvenile justice-involved students and teachers, and I echo that need. PAR is a research approach that collaborates with all stakeholders in the research process to address a specific issue, valuing participants as co-researchers. (Jacobs, 2016). Jacobs (2016) acknowledges the influential work of Freire on PAR in education, notably his concepts related to the difference between subject and objects in research; education does not happen to or for or about another, but *with* another. So, too, does PAR. In order to tackle any number of educational issues involving incarcerated individuals, I recommend that they be a part of the research and problem-solving effort; they understand the reality of their experience better than any outsider, however well-intentioned, and should be the co-constructors of solutions relative to their lives.



***Conduct research on the authentic literacy practices and skills of incarcerated individuals enrolled in ABE/ASE programs.***

As previously stated, much of the research involving incarcerated individuals' literacy practices and development is either dated or quantitatively de-contextualized from their reality. Throughout my time as an educator in jails and the course of this study, I have had a firsthand glimpse into the reading and writing practices of incarcerated folks, and my biggest takeaways have been that regardless of literacy or educational level, these individuals read and write at a higher rate than anyone I know—myself, a highly educated, dissertation-writing doctoral student, included. The PIAAC research supports this as well, where survey findings report that incarcerated individuals write letters and read books at higher weekly rates than individuals on the outside (Cai et al., 2016). These authentic practices are often borne from their incarceration, as the findings from this study suggest. As such, I recommend conducting formal and informal qualitative studies, ideally PAR in nature, to better understand incarcerated individuals' broad authentic literacy practices. By doing so, correctional educators, providers, and researchers can better understand the multiple and developing funds of knowledge these individuals possess and work to create opportunities for furthering their development.

***Conduct research on the impact of technology on the writing practices of incarcerated individuals.***

While this study focuses on letter writing as an authentic practice within carceral culture, participants acknowledged that Los Angeles County is becoming an outlier: several other surrounding counties and the state prison system all allow incarcerated individuals access to tablets for communication, entertainment, and education. Many of the older participants derided the use of technology, blaming it for the fading art of letter-writing and writing skills in general,

while younger participants mentioned how they could communicate similarly to and as frequently as they did on the streets through text messaging on the tablets in prison. The findings in this study suggest that letter writing has motivated the participants to improve their writing skills—their grammar, punctuation, spelling, handwriting, etc.—as well as how, what, and why they communicate. Many always carry a dictionary with them so that they are prepared to write at any moment. They frequently ask and barter for more paper, pencils, envelopes, and stamps. However, with the increased accessibility to tablets and technology, many of these practices and items may disappear, mirroring the “death of the letter” on the outside (Stanley, 2015). I recommend that research be conducted on the authentic writing practices of incarcerated individuals who utilize technology and digital means of communication, exploring, as with this study, its role and value in their lives, as well as their practices, processes, and development.

### **Personal Reflection and Conclusion**

I think a lot about Ulysses’ comment at the end of our interview describing his near-primal need to write, to communicate: “If you give me a rock and some sand, I can write something.” His sentence immediately created clear images for me: Ulysses, in solitary, writing his name, history, story on the dirty floor of his cell; the castaway, scribbling an SOS in the sand, yearning to be heard, seen, found. But then I saw the cell floor swept clean in preparation for yet another inmate, the castaway’s message being washed away by the tide. I thought of the sand mandalas of Tibetan monks, beautiful works of art that are ceremoniously destroyed upon completion. I remembered the opening to Kahlil Gibran’s (1926) “Sand and Foam”:

I am forever walking upon these shores,

    Betwixt the sand and the foam.

The high tide will erase my footprints,  
And the wind will blow away the foam.  
But the sea and the shore will remain  
Forever.

Letters are both impermanent and permanent, the sand and the sea. The letter writer, pouring themselves onto the page, clears their head and heart for the time being. Now outside themselves, they send their letter out to the unknown, “the message in the bottle,” as Richard described it, washed out by the sea. But the letter also has staying power; as a tangible object, it lasts. The recipient can hold it, store it, reread it when they need it. Fleeting thoughts, feelings, memories, and experiences are concretized on the page, and one’s personal history—their legacy—remains.

I may be making more of Ulysses’ simple statement than he initially meant, but I tend to do that; this is, after all, a dissertation on letter writing in jail, a pretty niche topic that many folks would think nothing of. But his comment and the images conjured align with many of the major themes and findings from this study and life in general: a need to communicate, an awareness of one’s impermanence in Life and in the lives of others, and a desire to leave a legacy behind. For the participants in this study, letters and letter writing are means to address the bigness of these concepts, especially as they are experienced within the context of incarceration. Ulysses’ writing in the sand and Gibran’s high tide erasing those prints. The need to write, the putting something on the page, the rewriting. “Always we are chasing words, and always words recede,” writes Rabbi Heschel, combining these metaphors into one (2021, p. 18).

Ulysses’ interview, as with them all, is full of wisdom and insight; finding depth in these participants and what they say is easy to do because it is there. One of the goals of this study was to reveal just that, that these incarcerated adult students are complex humans going through a

complex experience. They are often given labels to minimize their existence—inmate, convict, dropout, gangbanger—but these never encapsulate their whole being; any one of them could say with more truth and conviction than Whitman himself, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (*Song of Myself (1892 Version)*, 2024). These multitudes challenge the duality that too often drives carceral culture from the inside and attitudes towards incarcerated folks from the outside: you are either good or bad, innocent or guilty, with us or against us, strong or weak, this neighborhood or that neighborhood, Norteños or Sureños, and on and on. If anything, I hope this study succeeds in revealing a fuller, more complete picture of these men. Sharing one’s self, making sense of one’s environment, and documenting one’s experience while incarcerated may lie “beyond the limits of language” (Heschel, 2021, p. 18), but these participants, even those with limited literacy skills, attempt to do so through the humble, jail-written handwritten letter.

APPENDIX A

JOEL'S LETTER

Dear Mom

I Hope This Letter Reaches Your Hands In Good Spirits And Health. Today's Wednesday February 19, 2024 All Day Long But Your Probably Not Going To Receive This Letter Until Another Week Or So. We Kind Of Just Got Off The Phone From Having A Bad Call And I Don't Like Hanging Up On Bad Terms, So I Figured I Would Put Some Of My Thought's That I Can't Explain Over The Phone On Paper For You. I've Just Been Kind Of Stressed Lately With My Dads Surgery Around The Corner, All The Unnecessary Drama Going On With My Mom / Sister And Especially With Trial Coming Up So Soon. Well I'm More Nervous Than Anything But Mostly Excited To Come Home To You Already. I've Been Feeling So Impatient These Last Two Years Waiting For The Outcome Of All This It's Been Giving Me A Bunch Of Anxiety. I'm Trying To Find Positive Ways To Get Rid Of This Energy Like Exercising, Reading, Or Keeping Busy By Doing Small Task But It Hasn't Been Working Out Too Well, Lowkey I Know That I Be Taking It Out On You Because You're The Closest Person To Me And That's Not An Excuse But I Want To Apologize For That Because It's Been Interfering With Our Relationship Lately. I Can Tell That The Pressure From My Court Dates Have Been Affecting You Too, So I Feel Wrong Throwing All This Weight That I Have On My Shoulders At You Because You Don't Deserve It. You Really Like My Biggest Support, Out Of Anybody I Have In My Life You've Been Here For Me The Whole Time And Never Let Me Down Or Left Me Hanging. To Be Honest I'm Embarrassed About The Whole Situation That Happened With My Mom. I Know It Wasn't My Fault And I Know That I Doesn't Make It Any Better But I Wanted To Say My Bad For Her Even Though She's Grown And Responsible For Her Own Actions But It Just Embarrasses Me Because She's My Mom And You Shouldn't Have To Be Putting Up With Stuff Like That You Already Got Enough Going On With Your Own Life And The Kids Not Only That But You Still Be Looking Out For My Sister As My Nephew, That Means A Lot To Me Forreals Though.

I know we've had our fair share of disagreements over serious and dumb things, but that's just miscommunication nothing that we can't fix or figure out ourselves, we gone be straight regardless. I'm going to try to have better visits with you, I'm gonna work on not letting my emotions get the best of me over the phone, and I'm gonna focus on not tripping on you so much because I know I be on your topic for no reason sometimes LOL. I don't know how to express how much I appreciate you, I don't think I could ever repay you for everything you've done and continue to do for me and my family, but just so you know I'm always going to love you regardless of the situation. You mean the world to me. It's unconditional

- Sincerely,



APPENDIX B

ULYSSES' LETTER

February 29/2024

Dear

HELLO MY LITTLE WOLF. I hope your little belly is full and that you are happy today. I am happy today because of you.

I am writing because I heard about your play... Yes, I heard about you way over here in the forest. The animals heard about it too. That's all we've been talking about here. We heard you remembered all of your lines and that when you sang you had the most beautiful voice of all. We also heard you were the prettiest, but we already knew that part. We are all sooooo proud of you. Do you remember our promise? If anybody ever tells you to stop singing... you sing even louder. Never stop singing. No matter what. That's your part of the promise. Do you remember my part of the promise? other side →

I Promised too. I Will be there to hear  
you Sing as soon as I find the  
Tjay White Tiger for you. I am still  
searching for him. He is so good at  
hiding, but I am better at finding things  
than anyone. You know that too. The Tjay  
Tiger and Me will be there in the  
front row cheering for you. I Can't Wait.

Well, it's time for Me to  
run. I think I saw some Tiger tracks.  
Be good and give a hug and a  
kiss from Me too.

I Love you More.  
See you soon.

Love & Loyalty  
Your favorite  
Walt.  
The Animals

WWWWTTT



## APPENDIX C

### ROBERTO'S LETTER

Dear M

May Our Heavenly Father allow these next few lines to reach your hands as you enjoy His Many Blessing. I pray for a hedge of protection to be placed around you, Abrelita and Ms . I've beseeched our Heavenly Father to render a healing over Vilma, For Him to be a balm for your ever ache, pain or discomfort.

The only thing that I can do is act as a prayer warrior, The good thing is that the Bible says that all things are possible in Jesus' Name. There is an un mistakeable power there when I call on The Savior. I know that He will intercede, For You and . Especially for Ten.

So today I earned a certificate of completion, for a class Social Values provided by The Dream Center. Its.. a start towards the paper trail that I'll need to board.. I've got to keep on doing the work. Plus my High School Diploma with also look good for board. Paper trail.

Turns out that there might be a decent amount of students Graduating this year. maybe enough to have a ceremony.. My whole reason for staying was to share that accomplishment with . but after our recent conversation I've given up hope..

Bottoms I hate what's happened to your mom. I hate what its done to your peace of

mind. More than anything I hate that I've left you alone to deal with so fricken much. My only contribution is a ton of Prayer. I choose to believe that He will intercede....

Pues I came across a grip of letters that I received from you starting Sept 15 21 until about April 22. I remember at the time receiving each piece of mail, I'd feel so much joy getting your mail then I'd feel Absolutely Rotten about the circumstances. You being thrown in jail because of my actions made Me feel so fricken Rotten.

I wish that I'd been able to get passed my hang ups back then and gave you the Cor response that you required. Because since Apr of 22 I've only received one piece of mail. Sheesh bottoms that's been a kick in the teeth.

But we had phone calls until recently (After Mom's Stroke) our light communication has dried up. All cards on the Table; I'm not digging it.. However I'm plain out of options. I have to be understanding and Supportive.

I just remember the Times after 2010 - 2013 or 14 when I was in Adsegs or The SHU you were again dealing with a plethora of bull crap and I lived on the back burner. I hated that crap then I don't like it now. Shooting straight I don't want to return to barely hearing from you or the leech.

However the truth is.... I've felt that it's almost inevitable. FROM THE MOMENT THAT

2

I chose to lay down my weapon and let them cuff me up I've been doing a slow step march towards becoming a memory.

My sentence was always gonna be the end. I held out hope that maybe the D.A would change but I've never been a lucky chump No I KNEW it was coming. When she held your freedom and happiness, happiness and peace of mind. hostage. I did the only honorable thing. I choose to put your needs 1st Not that its saying much you were only being Tortured to break me.

Well, heres the deal bottoms, I'd catch a grenade for you. Its only right for me to get you out of a situation you never had any business being in. Only since your mom got sick I've felt like I've been moved to the back burner. Where its only a matter of time until Im forgotten

That being said its no less than I deserve Maybe. I cant compete with the seriousness of your moms situation. Nor can I be a selfish peck and Demand attention. Im having to con front the hand that Ive been dealt. With as much honor and dignity that I can muster at this time.

Bottoms I love you. Thats the truth I love Tim THATS A FACT. BUT MY ROLE AS A HUSBAND OR FATHER HAS BEEN COMPROMISED I FAILED YOU BOTH MISERABLY. I TOOK THE TERM



I will do the time. I've DECIDED NOT TO WALLOW  
in self pity. I've DECIDED TO STRIVE TOWARDS A  
Future parole date (ONE I HAVE TO EARN). I'm  
being honest. I can't accept the role in your  
life the way that it stands right now...

I wanna remain being your husband  
but I think that its not even possible. My  
thoughts wishes or advice is ignored. Im already  
a memory, A burden to you most of the time  
and it feels like crap. Being a unwelcome  
spectator isnt at all appealing. I know that  
As it is I'll quickly come to resent it. So Im giving  
you the way out.

You had Mr \_\_\_\_\_ draw up those papers  
cause you knew that its just a foul situation  
now. I dont doubt your love. Niggah love you so bad  
Thats the Truth.. But there isnt any place for  
me unless you make That a priority. Are you  
willing to do the work of maintaining our Marriage  
I Being honest I sorta need to be needed  
and unless we are getting freaky you dont seem  
to want any part of me. I love you enough to  
say it. Im gonna give the phone a break.  
So try to respond according to your heart.

Please take care of yourself and our  
heart . I exit as I arrived with a  
prayer. God protect my rib and all she  
does In Jesus' name

Love

APPENDIX D

FREDDY'S LETTER

TO: My BEAUTIFUL WIFE

YO! WHATS UP BEAUTIFUL. I HOPE ALL IS WELL WITH YOU AND THE KIDS. I JUST RECEIVED THE ANNIVERSARY CARD ALONG WITH THE PICTURES. I REALLY APPRECIATE YOUR WORDS, IT MEANS A LOT TO ME. WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE WITHOUT YOU... BORING! ANYWAYS, I HOPE YOU LOVED THE ANNIVERSARY AND VALENTINE'S GIFTS I GOT YOU. I WANT TO TAKE THIS TIME TO REMIND YOU THAT YOU ARE A GREAT WIFE AND I LOVE YOU EACH AND EVERY DAY. I HOPE YOU GET TO OUTLINE ME BECAUSE ONE DAY OF MISSING YOU IS GOING TO BE TOO MUCH FOR ME TO TAKE. I DONT KNOW WHAT I'D REALLY DO WITH OUT YOU AND THE KIDS. I REALLY APPRECIATE THE WEEKLY VISITS, SEEING YOU AND THE KIDS EVERY WEEK KEEPS ME POSITIVE AND GIVES ME HOPE TO MAKE IT OUT SOON. I KNOW ITS ONLY BEEN ONE YEAR OF BEING MARRIED, BUT IT IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE LIFETIME WE WILL SPEND TOGETHER. I KNOW THE TIME I HAVE LEFT MIGHT SEEM LIKE FOREVER, BUT BEFORE YOU KNOW IT WE'LL BE TOGETHER.

I LOVE YOU AND I MISS YOU EVERYDAY. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AND MAY GOD BLESS YOU AND THE KIDS. PEACE!

P.S. SMILE FOR ME  
YOUR BEAUTIFUL.

LOVE ALWAYS  
YOUR HUSBAND

APPENDIX E

EDGAR'S LETTER

FEB. 28. 2024

SALUTATIONS HOMBRE, SORRY FOR NOT WRITING SOONER CARNAL, BUT MY MIND HAS BEEN ALL OVER THE PLACE FOR SOME TIME NOW. I HAD TO SNAP OUT OF IT & COME BACK TO REALITY. . . THANK YOU FOR BARRING W/ ME, AS WELL AS BEING THERE FOR ME - REAL TALK. I'D ALSO LIKE TO SAY THANK YOU FOR BEING YOURSELF. . . I JUST WANTED TO STOP BY & TALK AT CHA

LIFE IS A TRIP CARNAL, IM GLAD YOU & BOTH STOOD OUT THE WAY, CAUSE NIGGA YOU MADE IT (1) NOT TOO MANY PEOPLE CAN SAY THEY'VE BEEN THERE IN THE SHIT, SEEING SHIT, & DOING SHIT. I KNOW WHO WAS THERE, & WHO WAS GANG. YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY & ONLY 5 OF YOU CAME OUT ON TOP: YOU.

NO MATTER HOW OLD YOU GOT YOUR HEARTS, MINDS, & BELIEFS STOOD THE SAME (1) IM HAPPY FOR YOU, & I PRAY & HOPE THAT YOU STAY BLESSED IN YOUR OWN WAY'S FROM ALL ANGLES. LOOKING BACK AT THE YEARS, I AM THANKFUL & GRATEFUL BECAUSE YOU & I HAVE BEEN A PART OF MY LIFE & THAT IN IT SELF IS A BLESSING, THANK YOU FOOLIO!

NONE OF IT WAS PLANNED, WE JUST WINGED IT & LEARNED AS WE WENT - BUT NOT EVERYONE UNDERSTOOD. LOOK AT HOW THINGS ARE NOW & LOOK AT WHOSE AROUND WHETHER GOOD OR BAD. GROWING PAINS ARE REAL, WHAT WAS NORMAL FOR US WASN'T NORMAL FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE. WE HAD FUN, BUT THINGS HAPPEN, ITS SAD, ITS UNFORTUNATE, & ITS FUCKED UP. JUST KNOW I TIP MY HAT TO YOU CARNAL! BE COO, BE SAFE, BE SMART, & KEEP ON DOING WHAT YOU'RE DOING - LOVE YOU FOOLIE, THANKS FOR STICKING AROUND FOR ME BEFORE & AFTER THE SMOKE CLEARED.

PS. THANKS FOR STAYING IN CONTACT w/ MAOO ASS LOVE  
IF YOU SEND THEM YOURSELF FOR PICS "FREEPRINTS.COM"

IT CAN ONLY BE 5 PICS PER ENVELOPE, SAME INFO



APPENDIX F

DAVID'S LETTER

2-5-2024

Dear Cousin, I miss you I been well some day good some bad. I wanted to write you because you been on my mind. I am in less right now bored and it's a dude next to me talking alot. I hope you been good and been on that grind. I been staying out the way really to myself, because my homies got out. My prayers been working and I been at peace. I owe you this letter because you been so supportive and I Am so thankful for you and the family. I been bored asf since these new niggas come they are so retarded and always be on bunk shit. They always complaining about something. That's something I learned was not to complain, because it can always be worse. I am always grateful for the little things and all kinds of support that I have been getting. I do alot of reading now that keeps my occupied since these niggas done broke the phones. Now it's only one phone for 30 niggas. Straight crazy shit be happening over hotville. I hope I'll be able to give you a call before I get this letter. I'm gonna need to talk to [redacted] too, I'm tryna see what she be on out there. Let her know I miss her, and I'm coming back a better man for her. I been chillin besides that though I'm sick of looking at niggas all day. I miss my lil ones or whatever they be still. answering my calls and writing me letters. They been solid so you know they gonna fuck with me when I get out. That's all I really got though, my next court date April 19 so I gotta wait a little bit. Remeber I'm always praying for y'all I hope you do the same for me. I love you CUZZO. Keep chasing your dream. →

- Send me some books about how to start a business
- Send me some books about real estate
- Tell you brother start cutting hair again





# Distant love

Even though I don't know what  
may happen next

I pray that God gently guides your steps...

I'm going to Always still have love for you  
till my last dying breath...

Even if I have to kiss you through  
the phone or tell you goodnight I love U  
through a text...

officially we've grown apart, but I learned  
it's my fault, my mistakes and wrong actions left  
me in a

But it's cool because you live and you  
learn anyways life?

just gone use this time to focus on making myself  
a better person every day and night...

To where someone looks at me like  
in the past thing just happened to me  
and not have to wonder damn what  
happened to them or

not a distant memory to fade away  
but a good man truly here to stay!!

-Till next time you'll distant love



# Poem Therapy

Hey..

Before you leave I have something

I want to say..

Now my words aren't designed to persuade  
you to stay..

But I need you to know these feelings

I have for you would never go away..

Even if you decide to put my heart up  
on the shelf, and fall happy in love with  
someone else..

My infatuation for you will never cease  
to exist..

And I need not know your reason for leaving,  
because trying to learn from my mistakes  
would only take away from your peace..

And if I'm guilty of breaking your heart,  
I'll attempt to rebuild it piece by piece,

Even if it means giving you a portion of my own..

Its if the pieces of my heart are a souvenir  
to help you remember me while you're gone..

I might even find myself blowing  
kisses in the wind..

Hoping they travel the distance between  
now and then..

Curious to know if and when, they reached  
your lips..

I know nothing is more ambitious than this, but  
knowing it eventually will fade and tolerance is so blurry..

# Found Found Found

New Home New Job New car  
Happy were she is in her new **FOUND**  
ife.

Glad she Found Happiness again  
She's Appreciated to finally be **FOUND**...  
**FOUND** in the Embracing Grasp of her  
new Relationship she feels Gracefully  
Appreciated but was once Insecure and  
Alienated...

Alienated Found in her own world of Problems  
that were Overwhelming and too much to  
deal with so, she kept running...

Running to be Found.

**FOUND** recovered from her place of  
dispositioning.

**FOUND** putting herself back together learning  
her Value of life and worth...

Picking back up the pieces from where  
she once left off and let go.

**FOUND** is now a new Sense of  
self-confidence.

She's no longer Deceiving herself, but  
Now Starting to Love and Believe in herself

**FOUND**



# LOST LOST LOST

She's so LOST, unable to find her way.

Lacking ASSurance and Self confidence.

LOST She feels no longer visible, can't see herself in the mirror...

She's LOST helpless giving no ground for hope or love.

LOST having no expectation of good or success...

Seeming that it's the impossible out of reach, too difficult to deal with or accomplish

She's undesirable and unappreciated...

LOST constantly feeling Inadequate and no longer knows her worth.

She wants to be loved with kisses and hugs tired of being sad and alone.

LOST with poor choice of men sadly

she always ends up on her own...

Low on money for being kind and giving out loans.

She's LOST without guidance and doesn't know where she went wrong...

LOST and doesn't know where she belongs, tired of being played over and over like lyrics to a song...

LOST and tired of being lied to,

Didn't believe me when I told her

No one would ever love you the way I do!

I still love you and my  
Logi Bear 100% . Im always  
thinking about yall, wondering how  
and what yall doing. An Im not  
mad at you for making the choice  
to move on with your life I know  
shit happens. Im good though and  
I know if you happy I know that  
I should be alright. Just want the  
best for you, enjoy this holiday season.  
Happy Thanksgiving, Happy Birthday, and  
merry Christmas. You should be getting  
some stuff in the mail from me  
hope you like it. This was just a  
quick ill something get this off my chest.

The poems and drawings express my  
feelings a bit more, aint have to  
much to say but. Ima still be checkin  
up on you making sure you good.

-I love you Shar-tu

An I would like for us to still be friends to  
if that alright with you. Sorry it took  
this long had to put my pride to  
the side, and start making changes



APPENDIX H

JOSUE'S LETTERS

8/11/29  
Monday  
8:45 AM

! 

What up Shorty! Hopefully you  
and are doing O.K. You just  
stopped answering the phone!!  
What's up with that? I know that  
you aren't in jail because it rings.  
It's going on 5 years since Doc's been  
gone. Do you want me out of  
your life completely?? Are you  
staying away because of the  
trial? That's the only thing I could  
think of. I thought we were each other's  
shooting stars... It sounded good...

Look I know you're no  
longer my lady, But we promised  
each other that we would always  
be friends. Remember in my car?


I ain't perfect. Far from it,  
but I do keep my word. That's  
all I got besides my balls.

LMAO! I just miss you. You  
are one of the few that makes it

better. I love you so much, that  
if you are staying away to better  
yourself, so be it. Whatever it takes  
for you, and to be good  
& safe, I'm down for that. I just  
wish you would communicate with  
me, or at least with . . . By  
the way, had her baby on  
Leap 1 day. I have a new niece.  
Her name is . . . but  
I call her Leap. Tell  
said hi. There is no deal on the  
table so I'm going to trial. I hope  
to hear from you. I love you  
friend. Take care.

Love  
Always


Dad.

  
I'll still be here  
By: The Notation



→ The house of the rising sun →  
By: C.C.R.

→ Misunderstood, →  
By: The animals

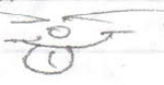
Footnote: 

3/12/24 Tuesday 11:24 AM

I would like to add to my interview that letters from jail/prison is a Federal right. It's not a privilege.

Visits and phone time are not a right, they are a privilege. Another thing that makes letters more powerful is show you, and that other person can read in between the lines. Anyone can type a letter and pretend to be you, but when you write a letter, it's kind of leaving a little bit of your D.V.O.T. behind. It makes it official. Of course any one can

catfish some one that they first met through letters. But even then, the person you are writing to will recognize your writing. Another reason letters are really powerful is because you, and the person receiving the letter get to use the imagination together. It's almost like casting a spell. It could be a good or bad spell. LMAO! I've threaten and

even made love through the pencil and paper. That's what I mean by casting a spell.  Writing letters have

helped me grow personally. Every body  
can talk, but everybody can't write, for  
the most part. Also if you notice I  
pass the red line on the sheet of paper I  
write on. I know, I know, I'm always  
crossing the line! LMAO! I got to use all  
the paper I got. 😁 Ain't no margins  
here hannie!! LOL! As you can see I  
missed all of these important facts  
when Mr. Will recorded me. But as I  
sit here and digest my thoughts I get  
to share with you all a little  
present from the inside. Well I hope  
all of this helps anyone grow as a writer.  
Well I'm gonna go ahead and pull the  
trigger and shoot this out! ☺☺ I'm  
Noutta here like the Po Po' is coming!!

P.S. I give Mr. Will permission  
to use all of this just the way it is.  
Why? Because this is me. It's the  
real deal Holyfield LMAO!

This is my  
life  
with communication people understand each other.



APPENDIX I

RICHARD'S LETTER

Hello son

3-12-2021

I've tried calling you many times over the past two months but I can't seem to catch you. You must be busy.

I don't have anything to talk about really I just wonder what your up to and how your doing.

As for me nothing has changed. I go back to court 3-14-24 so by the time you get this I will have already gone to it, hopefully it goes well. I think about you all the time.

I don't know what you would like to know about or I would write it in a letter and send it to you. So if you have something you want from me you'll have to let me know what it is.

Until then my letters are going to be short.

I love and miss you so much....

Feel free to write anytime and say whats on your mind.

Love you!

APPENDIX J

MARIO'S LETTER

SAFELY CHOW

Will Guess Hwo Back

Back: AGen So what UP

GIRLL hay are you OK How do

You fill out There now

That we not There you

miss Me I Do "ALot" IT

COOL IF YOU DONT I'M

100% SHUR That you

DO E HAY CAN YOU PAY

This song BY Brentwood CAN

YOU Dig it: SUP Whoop. WALLA!"

APPENDIX K

DERRICK'S LETTER

TARGET :  
GHOOTA :  
MOOD : HEALTHY  
SONG DEDICATION : YOUNG THUGS - HELPIN ME BREATHE

HELLO M, I MISS YOU A LOT! I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE YOUR FACE AGAIN. I ALWAYS THINK ABOUT YOUR BEAUTIFUL ROSEY CHEEKS. I MISS THE WAY YOU SMILED AT ME. U MADE ME FEEL LIKE THE ONLY NIGGA IN THE WORLD. IT WARMS MY HEART TO HEAR YOU WHEN WE TALK ONNA PHONE. I CAN ALWAYS IMAGINE YOUR SMILE AND BEAUTIFUL BROWN EYES. I PRAY WE REMAIN IN EACHOTHER'S LIVES FOR A LONG TIME.

HOW WAS YOUR MOM'S BDAY? HOPE SHE ENJOYED HER BIG 5-0 & I HOPE EVERYTHING WENT AS PLANNED. HOW DID HER CAKE TURN OUT? WHAT ELSE DID YOU GET HER? WHAT DID YOU GET HER? DID YOU ENJOY SPENDING TIME WITH YOUR FAMILIA? TELL HER I SAID THANK YOU & FELIZ CUMPLEANOS!!

WE SPOKE RECENTLY ABOUT HOW YOU'D BE PASSING OUT WATERS AT THE L.A. MARATHON. HOW WAS THAT EXPERIENCE? DID ANYTHING COOL HAPPEN? DID YOU EAT ANYTHING GOOD AFTER? WE ALSO SPOKE A LIL ABOUT YOUR TEST. YOU DONT THINK YOU DID WELL ON THAT ONE BUT HOPEFULLY YOU'LL BE SURPRISED. BUT IF NOT, YOU'LL BE READY FOR 'EM NEXT TIME. I'M ALSO GLAD YOUR FEELINGS BETTER HEALTHWISE.

I'M A STAY POSITIVE IN HERE M. I LOVE YOU

- I'LL WRITE AGAIN SOON. BYE, BEAUTIFU



APPENDIX L

LAMONT'S LETTER

1-8-24

Dear Love One's

I love all yall, by the time yall get this I will be home safe and sound, I can't wait to see you all I've been prayin 2 GO Home since day one I Can't wait to spend time with all yall, I've been here since September 21st, 2023, I've spent Thanksgiving, Halloween, my siblings birthday, my mother birthday, and Christmas, and new years, in here. Never again will I do anytime in Jail. Ever again. I Really did not plan on writing this so the more I write the more my handwriting will get worse. I will send this letter to [redacted] but I will have her send Pictures of the letter to [redacted] and Momma, I just sent it to baby because she should get it faster. And she could share it with the fam, im not going to lie, I can't wait to go home. im literally fcein to go home. I dont see no other way after January 22, 2024. I only see me going home from court on the 22nd. I just want to give thanks to the lord for staying with me. And giving me the Power to believe and having the power to receive. The same day i come home which will be January 22nd i will cry like a baby not because i was in Jail but because im now home. Its been a long time coming so im 4 make it last longer.

APPENDIX M

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA and a correctional educator here at XXX dedicated to improving the educational experiences of incarcerated adult students.

I am conducting a research study to better understand the letter-writing experiences and practices of incarcerated adult students enrolled in a high school diploma program. As a teacher within this and other jails for many years, I recognize the prevalence of letter writing and the multiple skills involved in the composition process. My goals for this study are:

- 1. To learn more about and celebrate the art of letter writing, focusing on the assets incarcerated students bring to this literacy practice
- 2. To offer insight to correctional education programs and instructors on how best to support the literacy development of their students through contextually relevant instruction

With this research study, I intend to interview students to learn about their letter-writing practices and what letters mean to them. In addition to an interview, participants will be asked to provide a sample letter of their choosing to explore and explain their writing process.

Participation in this research study is voluntary and will be completely anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be collected from you at any point in this study.

Participation in this study will have no effect on sentencing, parole/probation, or any other aspect of your case. Additionally, participation in this study does not affect your relationship with the school, teachers, staff, or facility in any way. You will not receive any added benefit for participating in this study, nor will you receive any repercussions for information you might share about your experiences.

A separate Study Information Sheet that contains more specifics about the study is also available. If you are interested in participating, please sign this flyer and return it to me or your other teachers. Feel free to reach out for questions or concerns about the study.

Warm regards,

Will  
Doctoral Candidate, UCLA Educational Leadership Program

Are you interested in participating in this research study? Circle your selection:

Yes

No

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

BN: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX N  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Interviewee Name:**

**Selected Pseudonym:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Welcome and Introduction**

Good afternoon and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Will, and I'm a teacher down on 3000 and a doctoral student at UCLA. The purpose of the interview is for you to talk about the letters you write—what they mean to you, what your writing process is like, and how you think about yourself as a writer. There are no right or wrong answers—just your answers. Thank you for bringing in one of your own letters; I look forward to learning from you.

**Informed Consent**

The interview should last between 30 to 45 minutes, and I will be recording this interview so that I can later transcribe our conversation verbatim. I will use a pseudonym for you and anyone you mention to protect your privacy. Please refrain from speaking about any active cases you may be involved in. Know that everything you say is confidential, and this recording will not be shared with anyone else. If, at any point during our conversation, you feel uncomfortable or need to take a break, please let me know. I appreciate and respect your willingness to share your thoughts and experiences. Do you have any questions for me before we get started? If not, let's begin.

**Questions**

1. To reaffirm, can I record this conversation?



2. I'd like to first get to know a little about you as a person and student. (Feel free to share as much or as little as you like.)
  - a. Where were you born and raised?
  - b. How far did you get in school when you were on the outs?
    - i. What was that experience like for you?
3. Can you talk about what motivated you to enroll in school here at MCJ?
  - a. How long have you been enrolled in school?
  - b. What other educational programs have you participated in at this facility or elsewhere during your incarceration?
4. What kind of writing did you do on the streets? (Text, email, social media, journaling, creative writing, writing for work, etc.)
  - a. How often were you doing any writing?
  - b. Who did you mostly write to?
5. What was your experience with handwritten letters before being in jail?
  - a. What are some of your earliest letter-writing memories?
6. Can you describe the first letter you wrote in jail?
  - a. What prompted you to write that first letter?
  - b. To whom was it written? How long into your incarceration? How long was it?  
How long did it take?
7. How would you compare and contrast your writing process in jail to your writing on the streets?
  - a. Which is more challenging and why? Which did you do more of and why? Which do you think means more and why?

8. Why do you write letters?
  - a. What can you say in letters that you can't say over the phone or during a visit?
9. Can you tell me a little bit about this letter you brought today?
  - a. What led you to write this particular letter?
  - b. What is your relationship with this person? How often do you write them?
10. What are you trying to achieve with this letter?
11. How does this letter accurately reflect you as a person?
  - a. How would your recipient "know" it's from you?
12. What do you think are the strongest parts of the letter—what are you most proud of?
13. Please walk me through your writing process for this letter.
  - a. What prompted you to write this letter?
  - b. Where did you get the supplies—school, store, friend?
  - c. Where did you write it? When did you write it?
  - d. How did you start to write the letter?
    - i. Did you first imagine the person? Think about how they would feel? Write what you think they want to hear?
  - e. How did you like to come across in this letter? (Funny? Serious? Confident? Hopeful? Loving?)
  - f. How did you feel while writing this letter? Did that change during the process?
  - g. How long did it take you to compose this letter?
  - h. How many times did you revise, rewrite, or reread your letter?
  - i. Did you receive help from anyone during the writing process?
  - j. Do you expect to get a response? Why?

- k. How did you feel after you wrote the letter? Satisfied? Nervous? Happy? Eager?
14. How did you learn to send letters in jail?
- a. Fellow inmates/classmates? Bunkie/cellie? Jail culture? Jail staff?
15. How often do you write letters?
- a. How many people do you write to?
  - b. How often do you write them? (How many times a week/month?)
16. In what ways, if any, does your writing change based on who you're writing to?
- a. If you are bi/multilingual, how do you use language differently in your letters?
17. Besides your own words, what else do you include in your letters?
- a. Drawings/artwork, lyrics, quotes, etc.?
  - b. If so, what do these add to your letters? Do you do it all yourself, or do you have someone help you? How does that come about?
18. What, if anything, ever prevents you from writing a letter?
- a. Embarrassing? Concerns over not getting a response? Knowing they will be read/reviewed by jail staff?
19. What does it mean to you to send letters?
- a. How do you show that?
20. What does it mean to you to receive them?
- a. How do you show that?
21. How do you feel about yourself as a writer?
- a. In what areas, if any, have you changed or grown since you started writing letters?
  - b. In what areas would you like to continue to improve? (Spelling, grammar, handwriting, voice, etc.)

22. What kind of connection, if any, do you see between your writing and your educational or professional goals?

a. How may the practice of letter writing be beneficial to those goals?

23. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about your letter-writing experiences that you haven't been able to?

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