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Memoir Pedagogy:  
Gender Narratives of Violence and Survival

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# MEMOIR PEDAGOGY: GENDER NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE AND SURVIVAL

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## Abstract

*Through our reading of the memoirs of women political prisoners in Morocco, Iraq, and Iran, this article explores the transnational feminist praxis of building solidarity. We cross-read these memoirs in the context of Aboriginal women's encounter with state violence in Canada. This cross-reading and contemplation are intended to trouble the liberal notions of multiculturalism, settlement, and integration and to connect transitions in the lives of women who deal with war, militarism, racism, violence, and poverty. Therefore, the question we address is how to read the memoirs in the context of history and find the missing links between, for instance, colonization and migration, militarization and liberal democracy, racism and multiculturalism? How can we read them in the context of Canadian history and contemporary geopolitical positioning? In this article, we discuss the memoir genre in relation to public pedagogies, describe the memoirs on which we focus, discuss their main themes that emerged from our analysis, and explore the ways in which they intersect. We read the memoirs as living texts of society, culture, and history; in other words, we read the social and historical through the voice of the individual. Our aim is to explore the possibilities of teaching memoirs and developing memoir pedagogy as a transformative adult education option.*

## Résumé

*À travers la lecture des mémoires des prisonnières politiques au Maroc, en Irak et en Iran, cet article explore la praxis féministe transnationale du renforcement de la solidarité. Nous pratiquons une lecture croisée de ces mémoires dans le contexte de la violence étatique que subissent les femmes autochtones au Canada. Notre lecture et notre contemplation visent à troubler les notions libérales du multiculturalisme, de l'établissement et de l'intégration ainsi qu'à connecter les transitions dans la vie des femmes soumises à la guerre, au militarisme, au racisme, à la violence et à la pauvreté.*

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*Par conséquent, les questions qui nous préoccupent sont les suivantes : comment lire les mémoires dans le contexte de l'histoire pour trouver les liens manquants entre, par exemple, la colonisation et la migration, entre la militarisation et la démocratie libérale, entre le racisme et le multiculturalisme ? Comment pouvons-nous les lire dans le contexte de l'histoire canadienne et du positionnement géopolitique contemporain ? Dans cet article, nous discutons du genre des mémoires par rapport aux pédagogies publiques ; nous décrivons les mémoires sur lesquels nous nous concentrons ; nous discutons des thèmes majeurs qui se dégagent de notre analyse ; nous explorons les manières dont tout cela se croise. Nous lisons les mémoires en tant que textes vivants de la société, de la culture et de l'histoire. En d'autres termes, nous lisons le social et l'historique à travers la voix individuelle. Notre objectif est d'explorer les possibilités de l'enseignement des mémoires et du développement d'une pédagogie des mémoires en tant qu'une option transformative de l'éducation des adultes.*

### Introduction

Studying autobiographical work is, if nothing else, an enduring lesson in humility. (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. xiv)

There is a growing body of literature documenting, archiving, and analyzing various forms of violence against women. This interdisciplinary literature maps out the diverse modes women employ to resist and survive violence. This body of knowledge demonstrates that violence shatters relationships and destroys community (Herman, 1992; Horsman, 1999; Martinez-Salazar, 2008; Riaño-Alcalá & Baines, 2011). However, feminist studies of violence suggest that remembering experiences of violence is essential to resistance, recovery, and the process of rebuilding community (Osborne, 2014; Smith & Watson, 1998). Community begins to be re-established when people are able to remember together, giving testimony to their experiences and having others bear witness to their experiences. Individuals and communities can form a sense of purpose by transforming the act of remembering and witnessing to a living document for social action. The living document can restore and renew the sense of collective struggle for common good. Collective struggle is a praxis embedded in much of Canadian adult education (Nesbit, Brigham, Taber, & Gibb, 2013).

Through our thematic analysis of the memoirs of women political prisoners in Morocco, Iraq, and Iran, this article takes a critical adult education approach to explore the transnational feminist praxis of building solidarity. We cross-read these memoirs in the context of Aboriginal women's encounter with state violence in Canada. This cross-reading contemplation is intended to trouble the liberal notions of multiculturalism, settlement, and integration and to connect transitions in the lives of women who deal with war, militarism, racism, violence, and poverty. Therefore, the questions we ask are: How to read the memoirs in the context of history and find the missing links between, for instance, colonization and migration, militarization and liberal democracy, racism and multiculturalism? How to read them in the context of Canadian history and contemporary positioning? While Canadians often subscribe to a discourse of equal rights (Brodie, 2008), the nation is constructed on neo-liberal ideals that, as Walby (2011) argued, are connected to militarism, protectionism, and xenophobia. Many Canadians would likely be surprised by the similarities in the

experiences of women political prisoners in the Middle East with Aboriginal women who survived the Canadian Indian Residential Schools (IRSs). The thematic analysis of the books discussed in this article is the first stage in our research project. In the second stage, we will read and discuss memoirs of prison and IRSs in reading circles, where we plan to explore how to read, teach, and act upon the knowledge produced in memoirs, a process we have named “Memoir Pedagogy.”

Before we begin, however, we must make a point about our theoretical and pedagogical orientation. Although adult education in Canada has a continuing legacy of critical thought (Nesbit, Brigham, Taber, & Gibb, 2013) and a rich engagement with feminism (which this issue as a whole demonstrates), there is little study on analyzing and reading women and violence through memoirs. We build on adult education research that explores public pedagogies and advocate for the practice of theoretical borrowing to advance critical pedagogy and praxis. We draw from a Marxist feminist articulation of state, war, violence (Mojab & Carpenter, 2011), and transnational feminist antimilitarism (Enloe, 2007; Taber, 2009) to explore the interrelatedness of race, class, gender, patriarchy, and sexuality with capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism, as well as the ways with which war and militarization create the conditions to (re)produce racialized patriarchy. We consider ourselves critical, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist feminist adult educators. Our pedagogical approach is inspired and informed by the ways women navigate, resist, and survive social relations of power that appear in diverse patriarchal forms of racism, state violence, religion, capitalism, or heteronormativity. This means that we try to explicate the world as it is being lived by women. Our teaching and scholarship, therefore, are the embodiments of critical feminist praxis.

In this article, we discuss the memoir genre in relation to public pedagogies, describe the memoirs on which we focus, discuss the main themes that emerged from our analysis, and explore the ways in which they intersect. We read the memoirs as living texts of society, culture, and history; in other words, we read the social and historical through the voice of the individual. We argue that the memoirs of these women illuminate how adult educators can critically engage with transnational feminism and pedagogies of crossing to reimagine the praxis of freedom (Alexander, 2005). In our search to renew reading materials for our courses, which focus on war, violence, occupation, genocide, social movements, and learning, we decided to merge two bodies of knowledge produced by women political prisoners of the Middle East and Aboriginal women experienced with IRSs in Canada, connected as they are through their experiences of state violence. We consider this knowledge, which appears in the form of memoirs, as living texts to read history, culture, social relations, and modes of resistance and survival learning (Mojab & McDonald, 2008). Our aim is to explore the possibility of teaching memoirs and develop memoir pedagogy as a critical learning option.

### **Public Pedagogies and Women’s Memoirs**

The exploration of popular culture as a public pedagogy is well established in the field of adult education, particularly as it relates to television programs, films, and music videos (Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas & Knutson, 2013; Sandlin, Redmon Wright, & Clark, 2011; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Books of all genres are also increasingly included as artifacts of popular culture, particularly due to the fact that the

publishing industry is globally commodified (Zipes, 1979/2002). Recent book series have become phenomena (i.e., Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2013, in relation to *The Hunger Games* and Petersen, 2012, in relation to *Twilight*). There has been some research in adult education about learning from literature (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013; Jarvis, 1999). The memoir genre so far appears untouched by adult educators, although it has been explored in relation to issues of truthfulness (Rak, 2012), militarism (Woodward & Jenkins, 2012), and stereotypical representations (Smith, 2007). In this article, we add to the research on fiction as a public pedagogy, turning our attention to a thematic analysis of women's (non-fiction) narratives of violence and survival.

Over the last several years, women's memoirs have topped bestseller lists. For instance, two memoirs, *I Am Malala* (Yousafzai with Lamb, 2013) and *A House in the Sky: A Memoir* (Lindhout & Corbett, 2013), were on the *Globe and Mail's* bestseller list on November 16, 2013 (#2 and #7, respectively), November 9, 2013 (#2 and #5), November 2, 2013 (#1 and #3), and October 26, 2013 (#1 and #4). Other bestselling examples include *A Woman among Warlords* (Joya, 2011), *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir* (Nemat, 2008), *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (Nafisi, 2013), and *Infidel* (Ali, 2008). Certainly there are more examples of recently released memoirs. What these memoirs have in common is that they are about women who have experienced patriarchal-religious and state violence in countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Moreover, these memoirs demonstrate that there are complex expectations of memory work. Certain forms of collective memory are valued over others (Fournier et al., 2012; Halbwachs, 1950; Whitlock, 2007), particularly in the genre of prison literature where there are direct challenges to the power of the state (Smith, 2007; Woodward & Jenkins, 2012; Wu & Livescu, 2011). For this research, we are deliberately focusing on less well-known, nonetheless powerfully narrated, memoirs to acknowledge the political economy of memoir production and memoirs' cultural consumption. Our intent is also to turn Canadian gazes inward to the responsibility of settler-White Canadians to confront the historical and contemporary injustices against Aboriginal peoples.

Political prisoners, their repression and resistance, are a prominent feature of modern political culture in the Middle East. The vast memoir literature produced by prisoners, especially women, and published in diaspora in recent decades has not attracted research attention. This silence invites explanation. Despite limited knowledge in English on political prisoners, an amazing body of literature is emerging in Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, and Turkish. These memoirs (in the form of books, articles, edited volumes, and special issues of journals) cover a wide range of tales of pain, resistance, hope, hate, love, courage, and despair. They are valuable resources to be read, analyzed, and taught. Written words are not the only means by which these experiences are narrated; a more creative depiction of the horror of prisons is found in the media of film, dance, theatre, painting, music, and handicrafts.<sup>1</sup> In *We Lived to Tell* (2007), Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr, and Shadi Parsi (three authors who decided to use pseudonyms) attempted to memorialize their experience of prison in Iran in order to learn and remember. Mojab (2007) wrote in the introduction of this book:

They write these memoirs . . . to put us in touch with the most humane aspects of being human. They are voices of thousands of other women who

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1 For a comprehensive archive of this literature, see [www.womenpoliticalprisoners.com](http://www.womenpoliticalprisoners.com).

were incarcerated, and often did not survive. They are inviting us, in the most intricate ways, to their private lives that were publically brutalized . . . . What we understand through their words is that they are secular women with deep yearning for social justice. They have refused to submit, to compromise, and to be silent . . . . These women ruptured boundaries of patriarchal-religious submissiveness, pushed their sexualized body into the sphere of public and claimed rights. Crossing these boundaries was their crime. (pp. 8–9)

State repression and violence have also been perpetrated in Canada, particularly in reference to Aboriginal peoples and mandatory IRSs, the aim of which was to “kill the Indian in the child” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d., para. 6). Haig-Brown (2006) explained that “European teachers and priests, strong in their belief in hierarchy and the superiority of their cultures, attempted to annihilate Native cultures and to absorb the children . . . into their power structure” (p. 126). Paul (2000) argued that there was an “unwritten requirement of White society—‘You may have an [inferior] education, but only if you agree to assimilate and accept the eventual extinction of your culture’” (p. 258). In 2008 the Canadian government officially apologized for the residential school system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada), yet the year after that, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, addressing a G20 meeting, stated, “We also have no history of colonialism” (Ljunggren, 2009, para. 11), roundly ignoring the fact that Canada’s treatment of Aboriginal peoples was most certainly colonial and has also been described as cultural genocide.

We have selected four books to try out some of our preliminary ideas on memoir pedagogy. These books are *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Talebi, 2011), *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi’kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Knockwood, 2001), *Talk of Darkness* (El Bouih, 2008), and *Through the Vast Halls of Memory* (Zangana, 1991). Below we have provided a brief synopsis of each book in the alphabetical order of their title.

*Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* was written by Shahla Talebi, an Iranian woman who was imprisoned first from 1977 to 1978 and for a second time from 1983 to 1992. These years amount to a decade of life in captivity. Talebi is an anthropologist and currently teaches at Arizona State University. Each chapter in this book is illustrated with powerful drawings by Soudabeh Ardavan, a former cell mate (Ardavan, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Talebi meditates and contemplates as she tells about suffering, survival, and resolute hope and passion of herself and her prison companions. Therefore, the book weaves autobiography and memoir of torture, death, madness, betrayal, community, dreams, empathy, and life. Each chapter is named after a character who takes a central role in these fully human instances: Roya, Fozi, Kobra, Yousef, and Maryam. *Ghosts of Revolution* is a historical narration of a failed generation, though it is not a chronology of the defeated revolution of 1979 in Iran. Talebi powerfully captures the depth of “bare life” in prison when she tells about rape, sexuality, misogyny, and motherhood, or when she analyzes the method by which torture and punishment extend to family members or the organization of

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2 Ardavan was imprisoned for eight years (1981–1989) in Iran’s notorious Evin Prison. She secretly depicted daily life in prison through drawing and painting. Most of her art work was repeatedly confiscated or destroyed by prison authorities; the works that survived have been reprinted in their original small sizes in her book.

prison as a modern institution with a complex ideological and instrumental technique of disciplining and punishment. She also vigorously, poetically, and compassionately reminds readers of the power of imagination, dreaming, comradeship, empathy, resilience, laughter, and desire for life.

*Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* was written by Isabelle Knockwood, a Mi'kmaw woman who was a student at an IRS from ages 5 to 16. The school, which was run by the Catholic Church, was established in 1930 and closed in 1967. The book combines Knockwood's personal story with the stories of other survivors. Knockwood tells how the school separated her from her family, community, language, and culture. She was neglected and, although she states that she was not physically abused, she witnessed the abuse of others, which sometimes resulted in death. The students were forced to worship as Catholics, with "religion . . . practiced as brutal compulsion" (p. 158). The word "school" in Indian Residential School is a misnomer; so-called students were not taught to succeed academically but to hate their Indian identity. Knockwood's memoir makes it clear that the school was indeed a prison. "The school was so strongly associated with punishment in children's minds that those who were 'sent to Shubie' as a result of their family circumstances constantly wondered what crime they had committed" (p. 88). Knockwood also writes of moments of happiness, creativity, and resistance, revealing how resilience was intertwined with despair. Her experiences demonstrate the importance of exploring learning from a lifelong perspective; Knockwood's life as an adult is inextricably connected to her schooling experiences as a child. Furthermore, it was the writing of her book as an adult that assisted her in speaking with others about the IRS, coming to terms with her experience, and advocating for social change. In the words of her mentor, "Isabelle the adult has to go back into that school and find Isabelle the child, and take her by the hand and get her out of there" (p. 161).

*Talk of Darkness* was written by Fatna El Bouih, a Moroccan woman who "plunged into the new and exciting world of political and feminist activism in 1971" (p. xi). She was first arrested in 1974 as a leader of a high-school student strike to protest the poor condition of the secondary educational system in Morocco. Later, in 1977, she was arrested for the second time after she took part in a political gathering organized by a Marxist group. She was kidnapped from a friend's house and sent to the notorious torture centre of Derb Moulay Cherif and then transferred to various other prisons. El Bouih was interrogated, tortured, and isolated. She writes about the physical and mental pain of her incarceration and the intention of her captors to destruct "self and the soul by means of the body" (p. 6). She talks about resistance and the creation of a caring community to advocate for the rights of prisoners. The account of her long-awaited trial and eventual freedom illuminate the horror of incarceration mixed with her capacity for hope. She writes in the third-person voice: "The smelly, dirty, rotting, old walls would suck the sap of her youth. The rape of a flower in full bloom. Five years for the crime of imagining a better tomorrow, a world where human rights are respected, a world for women far removed from their inferior status" (p. 37). While in prison, she earned an undergraduate degree and began her master's, which necessitated her temporary transfer to other prisons to take her exams. She powerfully recounts moments of the brutal performance of sexuality and masculinity on her body under the condition of captivity.

*Through the Vast Halls of Memory* is Haifa Zangana's award-winning autobiography and one of the earliest prison memoirs, first published in English in 1991 with several prints.

Zangana graduated from the School of Pharmacy of the University of Baghdad in 1974. In this political autobiography, words appear seamless on the pages and, thus, its reading hardly leaves a space for the reader to catch up with one's own breath. Zangana wrote, "It is such a tiny book (86 pages) but it took me eight years to finish. I had to force myself while writing every single word to look at what has happened in the past, in prison" (personal communication, 2003). Zangana's memoir is the only book about women political prisoners written under Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. It is a hybrid text moving through spaces of prison, home, office, rooms, buses, and diverse geographical locations of London, Kurdistan, and Iraq. But most significantly it speaks from the site of home and exile, the yearning for past, nostalgia for the smell of a city, the way Mahmoud Darwish (2011) evokes smells of the cities. Zangana joined the Communist Party of Iraq in the early 1970s and was involved in a movement that opposed both the Ba'ath state and the mainstream Communist Party negotiating with the Ba'ath Party to participate in the government. Many members of the Communist Party of Iraq were arrested and tortured. Haifa said, "Some were executed, others survived to tell the tale" (personal communication, 2003). After her release from prison, she left Iraq for Syria in 1975. It was in Damascus where she joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and a year later she left to settle in London.

These four books offer readers a lens into memory work. Our goal is to trace and tell with clarity and ethics the ways in which the state built and legitimized its power through the practice of incarceration and genocide. In reading these memories we learn about women crossing the patriarchal boundaries of family, community, and the state. They demonstrate the transnational interconnections between structural violence and, thus, possibilities for building solidarities.

### **Memoir Pedagogy**

I would suggest that academic study of global political prison literature is still at a relatively early stage, and what is needed the most at present is to discover more works and explore innovative ways to study them. (Wu & Livescu, 2011, p. 14)

In our memoir pedagogy project we intend to "explore innovative ways" to integrate prison literature into our pedagogy and critical praxis. As was stated above, we are pursuing multiple goals in this project. We intend to analyze self and society; deepen our understanding of culture, society, and history; think through women in social movements and learning; and theorize consciousness and praxis. In this, the first stage, we engaged in a thematic analysis of four memoirs. Individually, we each read the books and coded for prominent themes. We then discussed our results, deciding to focus our attention on the three themes of resistance, community and comradeship, and learning and creativity for survival. We chose these themes because we believe they will lend themselves well to discussion in our reading circles to help us integrate concepts of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy as power relations with continuous presence in the past and future—a social and historical presence that has also sparked the most imaginative forms of human resilience, resistance, and survival. We acknowledge that space does not allow in-depth discussion of other themes such as sexuality, ideology, dreams, exile, trauma, or diaspora. Neither do we have space to address the difficult dilemma of ethical considerations in memoir work and the methodological issues in memory method. These are concerns that we will continue to explore as we move



forward with our research and design innovative ways to study autobiographical tales in order not to miss their nuances and richness.

### **Resistance**

When I once told my interrogator that they could not prevent the bird of my imagination and my spirit from flying beyond the imposed boundaries, he replied, "Forget about flying. We cut any wings that do not fly in our direction." (Talebi, 2011, p. 73)

In each of the memoirs, the authors directly confront the state as a patriarchal, racist, and authoritarian institution. They desire and dream for a better world. They want others to hear them, to join them *Through the Vast Halls of Memory* (Zangana, 1991) and bear witness to the atrocities committed against them by the state. They write about their experiences as a testimony of resistance against the injustices they faced. Talebi contemplates how to direct readers to see the larger social order through one woman's narrative. She writes:

What would be the best way to personalize the event without ignoring and detaching it from the larger sociopolitical and historical context within which each person has come to experience it? In what form and style might I relate my own story along with those of others, wherein their voices could be heard as powerfully as but distinct from mine? Is it even possible for others to have a voice of their own while their experience has to pass through the filter of my subjective memory and my writing? (p. 49)

Knockwood begins with an explanation that in writing her book she is "holding the talking stick" (p. 7), an "instrument of free speech that gives people who were once silenced an opportunity to say what is on their minds in the language they choose" (p. 8). She explains that her "long process of writing . . . forced me to overcome what I call the 'code of silence'" that surrounds her experiences at the IRS (p. 9). Similarly, El Bouih writes in the "Dedication" page of her book (*italics in original*):

*When the journalist Malika Malak interviewed me about my prison experience . . . she said to me, as her eyes filled up with tears, "Forgive me, because I revived your suffering . . ."*

*She did not know that her courageous initiative had broken the silence imposed on a voice, one that deviates from the familiar simply because it is both different and female.*

*There is another wound in Morocco memory, the memory of prison inflected in the feminine voice. Perhaps many are eager to hear the voice of this pain. A woman's capacity to resist is a vast sea without limit or measure.*

El Bouih, Talebi, and Zangana were captives of the authoritarian regimes of King Hassan II, the Shah and the Islamic regimes of Iran, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They joined radical, socialist, Marxist, and communist movements in the 1970s to resist the states' alliance with the United States and European imperialist powers. They had a vision to transform social relations of domination; bring an end to patriarchal colonialism, nationalism,

theocracy, and capitalism; or achieve freedom, democracy, equality, and justice. They chose a challenging path to push social and political boundaries. They defied social and cultural norms. El Bouih (2008) relates:

I never retained any of their rules. I tried to speak although it was forbidden. I moved in spite of their tough orders and strict instructions. I never learned to hear my number or my new name. I did not perfect the art of silence, obedience, or calling them Hajj [sir]. I paid clearly for all this, especially in the beginning. I recall that it was my luck to receive lots of kicks and beatings. (p. 9)

A form of resistance is in the authors' response to authorities' acts of silencing and shattering their body, soul, and identity. They fought to (re)gain their voices and (re)claim their selves. In Knockwood's experiences, voice was directly connected to the prohibition of speaking in Mi'kmaw. "The punishment for speaking Mi'kmaw began on our first day at school, but the punishment has continued all our lives as we try to piece together who we are and what the world means to us with a language many of us have had to re-learn as adults" (Knockwood, p. 100). From the minute they were institutionalized, their jailors worked to strip their identity, physically and metaphorically. The IRS began by changing the children's appearances with new haircuts and clothes: "We were given new clothes with wide black and white vertical stripes. Much later I discovered that this was almost identical to the prison garb of the time. We were also given numbers" (p. 31).

El Bouih was given a number and a man's name. She was told, "From now on, your name is Rashid" (p. 5). "That was the beginning of the destruction of my identity" she writes. "My kidnapping, my arbitrary imprisonment, and now the erasure of my femininity by treating me like a man. For them I became a man they called Rashid" (p. 5). Later, she writes of "intense joy when I felt I regained my name and my lost female self" (p. 13). Masculinization of women political prisoners is a form of patriarchal punishment to remind them that they have entered the forbidden sphere of male activity. Politics and confronting authority is closed to women as they should obey and submit to the rule of the patriarch of private home and obey the law of the public state. Under such harsh controlling conditions, women resisted whenever possible in order not to lose themselves. El Bouih tells the story of how the women prevented the rape of one of the inmates by refusing to be silent: "Despite the violence and the constant control over our bodies—though not our spirits—we were able to break the stranglehold of mandatory silence and continuous surveillance, and protest that despicable criminal's act" (p. 10). At the IRS, although there were more overt acts of resistance, Knockwood writes that "perhaps the most important form of resistance was inside our heads, even though it produced little outward sign at the time" (p. 127).

### ***Community and Comradeship***

[We need to] reclaim part of the cultural legacy that the school tried so hard to exterminate (Knockwood, 2001, p. 24).

In the memoirs, the authors discuss the importance of being connected to community, family, friends, and comrades. It was a great source of pain when these connections were broken. El Bouih explains that "the cruelest punishment for a prisoner is isolation" (p. 40). She and her comrades were separated not only from each other, but from their senses, as

they were often forbidden from speaking or seeing. "Despite the constant surveillance and harsh treatment from the guards, I managed to get close to my comrades. I built bridges between us" (p. 11). They learned to sense and communicate differently; they "grew used to hearing without seeing, and communicating without communicating" (p. 19). El Bouih was separated from her family but created a new one in prison, taking care of the child of another prisoner. However, she was denied this new family, both when the guards forced the little girl to go back with her mother and when she left the prison with relatives. El Bouih was occasionally reunited with other prisoners with whom she had formed a bond, explaining "how intense our happiness, how overwhelming our joy the day we were reunited" (p. 40).

Knockwood laments how she was separated not only from family members but also from her culture. "Traditionally we were all taught to take responsibility for the protection and nourishment of others, especially the very old, who had the wisdom and knowledge of the past, and the very young, who held the future. Older brothers and sisters were absolutely required to look after their younger siblings. When they went to the Residential School, being unable to protect their younger brothers and sisters became a source of life-long pain" (p. 18). Her culture was denigrated as "those who established the Indian Residential Schools across Canada regarded all we had learned from our parents and grandparents with contempt and hatred" (p. 22).

Family was also a source of comfort and protection for Knockwood: "For the next ten years, my parents came every Sunday afternoon to visit us. Just how much those visits protected us from the physical pain inflicted by the strap I can't imagine, for it was those little ones who had no parents who suffered the most abuse" (p. 29). Family members also worked to advocate for El Bouih, often unbeknownst to her, bringing food baskets and "always exploring possibilities and seeking information" (p. 20). Parents, siblings, husbands, lovers, and comrades are present in the memoirs. Talebi, for instance, remembers them affectionately and painfully:

Now I was out, and even before seeing my siblings, I was insisting on visiting the graves of my loved ones, including the mass graves somewhere within which my husband must have been buried . . . I felt the urge to talk to them and have them hear me through all the soil that covered them, as though wanting to do so before my voice and soul were tarnished by the pollution of the outside world. Fresh from jail, I had to promise them that I was not going to let them die in silence, that I would never forget them. (pp. 30–31)

Zangana recalls an endearing story of her mother that relates how family members read the signs of life and death of their loved ones in their daily encounters with prison authority. She writes:

My mother had one sole preoccupation: to leave home early each morning with a cardboard box containing a towel, some clothes and tins of food. And to the officer in charge, the sergeant and soldiers, she would repeat the same sentence: "Take the box, my daughter needs clothes. She was not allowed to take anything with her when she was arrested." The answer was likewise the same: "We haven't got a prisoner here with that name, who said we have political prisoners here? Don't you know we are living through a new era, the era of the National Front?" (pp. 45–46)

Zangana's mother is confronted with layers of lies about the fate of her daughter and the political structure of the nation. She decided to persist and show up at the prison gate for three weeks. Finally, a prison guard asked her to give him the box and the name of her daughter and leave the prison gate. "At home," Zangana writes, "a smile lighting up her face, she forbore my father's anger and bitterness. 'Didn't I tell you? She's still alive!'" (p. 46).

Building community in prison or exhibiting affection toward prison cellmates were also considered acts of resistance and defiance. Talebi writes about the forbidden act of sharing belongings or revealing closeness among women prisoners, which was considered homosexuality, a punishable relationship under Islamic theocracy. She states, "Prisoners could not share their belongings with one another since sharing was considered a symptom of communist sympathies" (p. 201). She poetically sums up the human essence in community and comradeship: "Our ordinary life therefore was suffused with constant innovation to make a truly social and caring life possible. The essential element of the art of living in prison was to be able to preserve compassion, care for one's self and others in the world in which, in the words of Shamlu, my favorite Iranian poet, 'they whip love on the obstructed road'" (p. 201).

### *Learning and Creativity for Survival*

Living in prison is an art for which you have to train yourself. Persons who accomplish the goal of living through this hell and surviving with their integrity not radically damaged are creators of the art that is simply their lives. (Talebi, 2011, p. 200)

Learning and creating in captivity is a contradictory experience. There are rewarding moments of educational experience and at times denigrating and abusive learning moments. El Bouih mentions these contradictory experiences: "Three years of preventative detention, prison, and struggle had given them a thorough education in the administration's operations. But these three years had taught them the methods of how to fight back as well" (p. 47). El Bouih and her prisoner comrades developed their own study groups. "Prison deprived us of vital and nourishing spaces in order to neutralize us. Instead, we took this as a challenge and renewed ties through various channels....On a fixed schedule, we would sleep one night and then stay wide awake all through the next night, discussing, studying, and debating what we had read. We studied literature and philosophy, read novels, learned about economics, sociology, and psychology" (p. 21). El Bouih was permitted to enroll in post-secondary education while in prison. She explains how she took "undergraduate *licence* exams under exceptional circumstances" (p. 41, italics in original). With no resources or ability to conduct research, she "promised her [teacher] to use my imagination, the only fertile space left to a prisoner" (p. 42). El Bouih used her degrees to become a high-school teacher and to support her work for social justice.

Knockwood knew her schooling was inferior, stating that "much of our learning took place despite, rather than because of, the nuns' efforts" (p. 56). It also cut her off from her culture. With the Mi'kmaw, "one of the principal ways of teaching young children was through the telling of legends that embodied thousands of years of experience in living off the land" (p. 17). However, at the IRS, "all instruction was given in the catechism method of teaching—memorizing questions and answers" (p. 53). She and the other children were "being forcibly disconnected from everything our parents and elders had taught us, and

everything new was learned in an atmosphere of fear. Shame too was associated with learning, particularly in history and catechism where Indians were depicted in a derogatory way as savages and heathens" (p. 52). Knockwood decided to take advantage of her situation when she had the opportunity to receive better schooling, staying with the nuns to access public high school. Knockwood explains, "At sixteen, I could easily have kept on walking down the hill and never gone back again. Going to the public school had opened up a door, and for the time being, the only way to keep that door ajar was to stay on at the Residential School" (p. 128). Knockwood's education helped her to question her experiences and contradict the official record that Mi'kmaw students were treated well. She:

was involved in the American Indian Movement and the Boston Indian Council. I was also taking a Women's Studies program from Goddard College, as well as joining a women's consciousness-raising group. From all of these, especially from the women's group, I got the message that not only was it all right to ask questions but that it was really important to do so. (p. 11)

Art was an important way for prisoners to express their own humanity. "Through this creation" tells Talebi:

one not only communicates with others but also articulates phenomena that are essentially in negation of all that torture seeks to destroy: love, resilience, passion for life, and creativity. Through making, the uncontrollable world becomes tangible. The same body that under torture seems one's enemy, in the process of creating, returns to us and helps us feel ourselves again. (p. 195)

She connects the creativity to living and resisting death and, thus, "art in prison is not a luxury but an essential element to keep the spirit moving, which might make survival possible" (p. 196). The artistic products in the form of drawings, knitting, or handicrafts repeatedly were confiscated from the prisoners. Knockwood explains how "we made rings for our fingers from the rings that come with sink and tub stoppers which we filed down on the cement floor in the recreation hall. Neat necklaces were made by stringing two of the chains together. But you couldn't let Wikew [the nun] see it" (p. 74). They also produced their own sports equipment, "making skis out of barrel staves from old apple barrels dumped behind the kitchen" (p. 78) and "making skipping ropes" (p. 78). They created "homemade checker-board and homemade cardboard checkers, and playing cards from homemade cardboard decks painted with crayons" (p. 79).

### Conclusion

I call attention to the complex politics involved in the representation of suffering and in the writing, reading, publishing, as well a potential commodifying and politicizing, of political prison literature. Although narratives from various areas reveal numerous commonalities in global carceral experience, I caution against erasing differences. Instead, I advocate the need to emphasize the specificities and their particular circumstances, contextualize them, and engage deeply with

the authors' subjectivities and interiorities. I also purpose that cross-cultural, cross-literary, comparative, and interdisciplinary studies of this literature can fruitfully uncover the literature's multiplicities, resources, transformations, and connectedness. (Wu & Livescu, 2011, p. 4)

The women authors of these four memoirs present a composite of a personal, social, and political experience of confronting the state violence in an IRS and prisons. They write about the past places in present memories. They tell because they do not want to forget. They speak of lost communities to restore living and voice and overcome death and silence. Their memoirs function as public pedagogies that, as argued by Gouthro and Holloway (2013) in relation to learning citizenship from fiction, can be used for social purpose learning in order to "gain a deeper understanding of other peoples experiences" and "challenge the narrowness of a worldview that asserts the dominance of [masculine] marketplace values" (p. 54). The memoirs in particular also address issues of race, religiosity, colonialism, and militarism. The discussion of the memoirs here is intended as an entry point into our use of memoir pedagogy in reading circles; the reading circles, in turn, will further inspire and sharpen our reading of memoirs. It is our hope that our use of literature as a public pedagogy will further advance critical feminist adult education in Canada.

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