The Fire Inside
SPECIAL ISSUE 2024

Open Letters
Acknowledgements

With great thanks to: the Department of African American and African Studies, University of California, Davis; Professor Ofelia Ortiz Cuevas, UC Davis Department of Chicano Studies; to the UC Davis students who worked on the project: Michaela Anang, Marlené Mercado, Sade Johnson, and London Legree; to the CCWP community both inside prison and outside; to all the writers in this project.

Our thanks to those who funded this project: University of California Humanities Research Institute’s Engaging Humanities Grant, the UC Davis Office of Public Scholarship’s Public Impact Research Initiative, and the UC Davis Center for the Advancement of Multicultural Perspectives on Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities.

For more information, please contact:
Prof. Benjamin Weber
Department of African American and African Studies
University of California, Davis
2201 Hart Hall
One Shields Ave.
Davis, CA 95616

California Coalition for Women Prisoners–Open Letters Project
4400 Market St.
Oakland, CA 94608
www.womenprisoners.org
info@womenprisoners.org

CCWP’s Mission

CCWP is a grassroots abolitionist organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people, and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

The writing and publishing of Open Letters is a tactic that has been used in political movements for many generations: from the anti-slavery/abolitionist movement of the 18th century, including works by Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth; to the anti-lynching campaigns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, e.g. Ida B. Wells-Barnett; the labor movement of that same era including the work of the industrial workers of the world (iww, wobblies); all of the open letters of the civil rights movement- from Dr. King’s Letter From The Birmingham Jail, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X’s Autobiography can be considered one of the longest open letters ever!; To the era of black power, including the Panther 21 writing from the depths of ny city’s jails as they fought ludicrous conspiracy charges (notably Joan Bird’s writings from the ny women’s house of detention); to Angela Davis and Assata Shakur. Now this tradition continues through to our movements of the 21st century, including Black Lives Matter (Alicia Garza) and more (Megan thee Stallion, et. al.).

Open letters have been used to educate, to agitate, to organize. They have helped to analyze and process the struggles and the deeply personal as well as political traumas that enslavement, racism, gender oppression and sexual exploitation, and incarceration, among many other Amerikkkan atrocities, have imposed on so many people. Open letters humanize, mobilize and empower people. And they also help people to heal.

In Fall of 2020, Dr. Ben Weber, an Assistant Professor in the Department of African American and African Studies at UC Davis, reached out to California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) to propose a collaboration: an open letter writing project with people incarcerated in CA women’s prisons. Two members of CCWP’s Fire Inside editorial group—Rachel Leah and Pam Fadem—joined Ben in planning this project. A collaborative effort began as the COVID pandemic raged.
We posted an invitation in CCWP’s quarterly newsletter, The Fire Inside, and people in prison responded. Because the newsletter reaches people incarcerated in both women’s and men’s prisons throughout the US, responses were not limited to CA, nor only to women’s prisons.

When we began the project, 20 people from both women’s and men’s CA prisons, and one person from a Pennsylvania state prison, took part. During the first year of the COVID pandemic, conditions for people in prisons throughout the US were horrendous. All programming—including education, healing groups, job training and regular jobs—was stopped, as was visiting. People were quarantined with little or no health care. People were isolated and locked into overcrowded rooms with little or no yard time. Many people got COVID; many people in prison died. Due to illness and other complications of incarceration, eight writers continued through to the end of the project. This special edition of The Fire Inside includes the work of these writers.

The project faced the ‘usual’ logistical challenges of collaborative work between people in prison and people outside: mail, including assigned readings, writings and peer responses, got lost; mail got denied; our writers in prison had little or no access to copy machines (most prison libraries and administrative jobs that provide access to copier machines were closed during the pandemic). While people outside of prison facilitated a lot of project logistics (Ben shouldered the lion’s share of all of the copying and mailing of materials and ongoing correspondence), this was a peer project: the incarcerated writers read each other’s work, commented, encouraged, and helped each other to finalize their writings.

Many of the writers spoke to the importance of the Open Letter Project during COVID lockdowns.

Joyce, incarcerated for over 24 years in Pennsylvania, wrote: “Where I’m housed (SCI-Muncy), I was denied a request to tune into the college-level lectures shown on institutional TV channels, to keep myself intellectually engaged. Yet, three thousand miles away, the Univ. of CA, Davis and CCWP embraced me and helped restore function to my brain when I literally needed help most.” (letter, Aug. 2023)

Laura, incarcerated for over 10 years in CDCR wrote, “This project helped me stay sane, connected and productive during COVID lockdowns.”
Delina said, “Opening my mind to various writings has allowed my creative understanding to flourish.”

Tamara, incarcerated for 28 ½ years on a Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentence, wrote that “the stories, poems and feedback brought tears to my eyes while strengthening my heart.”

Bambari, who spent over 25 years in solitary confinement and was released on parole at the end of 2023 wrote, “The Open Letter Project was a great opportunity for those of us behind prison walls to contribute to the broader community on a university level. The project was truly inspiring and made a positive imprint on my spirit.”

You will find brief biographies and photos of each of the writers in the back of this issue and addresses to write to them. As well, we include a list of the readings that were shared with all project participants and a brief description of how the project proceeded.

We welcome your responses and look forward to moving ahead with another collaborative project. •
Where I’m From

by Tamara Hinkle

I’m from the land of carefree adventures, reggae concerts, overcast theme parks, camping at Mt. Baldy and hiking Mt. Rubidoux.

I’m from track and field, softball, volleyball and basketball which my brothers made me play and I eventually grew to love...

Where every adult is respectfully called Auntie and Uncle...although we weren’t related.

Where it’s loyalty to god and family...no matter what! Where my ancestors struggled, preserved, and overcame because there are no quitters in my DNA!

Where music is played night and day... where the drum became my good friend...dance my twin.

Where food became my love...better than any drug...waterfalls and the beach my peace...when sexual abuse made me feel dirty.

Where family loved me unconditionally...through food, music, faith, virtues and belonging.

Where the neighbor could whoop you for being bad...and your parents too...where there was no ‘calling the people.’ because it wasn’t child abuse.

Where sticks and stones never broke my bones...and words no longer hurt me.

Where Monte Carlos and Volvos ran the streets and going to college is mandatory.

Where BBQ reigned supreme because everything is bigger in Texas. Where things were fun to see...right along with helping Mama deliver babies and take care of the elderly.

Where headscarves kept our hairstyles looking neat...the tribal languages of Kings and Queens.

Where every woman...does more than cook and clean...where women and children are respected, loved, esteemed, and protected.

Where men are respected, loved, and encouraged...because they are the head of the household...but still our biggest babies.

Where it’s OK to be different, to dream BIG! And to live out loud.

Where human beings are appreciated...because WE ALL ARE ONE...

*where I’m from*

Credit: Jessica Strohl
Woman you were born with everything you need to reign as queen!!

Power, beauty, intellect, self-love, creativity and respect lives in you!!

Your vision became distorted and you lost your way. Your quest for love led to tears and heartache.

Thought you weren’t good enough compared to Melissa, Tanisha, Carrine, and Lisa.

Woman, you are a beautiful masterpiece!!

Craved the love and attention of people who exploited you in every way caused you to misbehave.

Chased the high instead of your kids, the fast life and all its “benefits.”

Made that hole in your heart wishing you could press restart.

Betrayal showed you that people are cruel…

BUT...

Woman, you were born with everything you need to reign as Queen!!

Your power, beauty, intellect, self-love, creativity, and respect remains to be seen

Love the skin you’re in by receiving the CREATOR’s love!!

Your talents, gifts and qualities will cause you to succeed; not sliding down a pole or causing others grief!!

Do you realize how unique you are?

Woman, you are the strength of nations, giver of life, healer of hearts!!

Your spirit breaks generational curses!!

Your perseverance overcomes obstacles!!

You’re mentioned in history books!!

Return to a pure, unconditional love!!

Shine, heal, change and grow!!

Your presence will demand respect. Your light will attract others, some. Friend, some foe.

Be as wise as a serpent; and as gentle as a dove

WALK * IN * LOVE

Woman, your fight cannot be extinguished, your crown un tarnished

Your story proof that CREATOR paved the way for you to rise

Triumphantly

Woman, you are the change you want to see!!

One Love, Tamara
Woman with a Made-Up Mind

by Joyce Schofield

Spending decades incarcerated and away from my children doesn’t stop me from being happy when another inmate is released and walks out these gates of hellish agony and mental suffering into the loving arms of their loved ones.

One morning not too long ago, I went to the common room to say my last goodbye to a young lady who had spent some years in prison and was finally leaving to return to her daughter. I thought she would be overwhelmed with happiness. Instead, she was sitting alone and crying. I sat across from her, held her hands and we talked. She shared her mixed emotions of being both happy and scared of returning home. Her sadness was due to the fear of being pulled back into what she had lived before coming to prison. Her tears were really flowing and her fears were genuine. All I could do was be as real as possible.

“Baby Girl, I can see that you are stressed; your nerves seem to be jumping all over the place. Please take two mental pictures: one of what your life was before, and one of what you want it to be with your child in your arms. Is there really a choice of which lifestyle you want? Are you ready for all of your talent and glory to shine? I know you love and miss your child, so are you willing to enter her life again, allow her to love you and then break her little heart by leaving AGAIN? Now is the time, minutes before you walk out of these razor wired fences and these fortified gates, now is the time for you to become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND! Make up your mind this very moment how you want to live your life, be it risking your life every night or kissing and hugging your child as you put her down to sleep. You KNOW the pros and cons so let’s take a minute to choose. I’m encouraging you to become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND!”

Isn’t it achingly sad that as women we know when things aren’t going well in our lives yet we just won’t make up our minds to do something about it? I was once in that position, living a lie, accepting the abuse that I knew I should walk away from. Making a thousand excuses for not taking control of my life. “The children need their father” or “my business will falter” or “I’m too old to start over again”! Look at me now, sitting behind bars wishing I had become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND when I was in the free world, I should have gathered my children and walked out of that house ten thousand times over. If I
had made up my mind not to accept the verbal and psychological abuse, the name calling and cussing that denied me peace in my own home; if I had sought a friend or even a stranger to talk to; if I had called a center designed to help women...if, if, if...a thousand times - if! I would be free to be with my children. I would be able to walk in the sand and watch the sunsets. I would be helping my granddaughter with her homework this very day.

My family used to cook one hundred meals per month to feed the homeless. The thought of humans having to scrounge for food was upsetting to us. Even as a woman without a made up mind, I believed in good food as a way of restoring mental balance. Now, some of my meals are unidentifiable; ground chicken looks just like ground pork. Porcupine meatballs are listed on the menu with a little animated rodent running across the screen to excite the appetite. I fed hundreds but can’t do a thing about the food served to me that’s labeled “NOT FIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION.”

An MRI revealed I had a brain tumor and I asked for a treatment plan. If I were in the free world, medical administrations would not have ordered a mental evaluation to see if I were going crazy to suggest such a thing or just a big liar. Rest in peace my sisters Renee and Tereasa, for you paid the ultimate price when the prison rule of not informing you of your cancer was enforced until you were in the fourth and final stage I too live under such harsh rules. Wish I had become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND long before I ended up in prison and sick!

Today I am thankful that I’ve renewed my relationship with God and with my strengthening faith, healing has begun. It wasn’t easy; it took time and step-by-step efforts. I allowed myself to ask for the help I needed. I sought out resources available to me and I talked to other women and was honest in what I shared. All of these things help me become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND.

So now mentally, I embrace every woman, be she behind bars or in the free world. I invite you to take whatever steps necessary so that you too can become A WOMAN WITH A MADE UP MIND!
I want better for you
Than remaining perpetually stuck
In all the worst feelings
By a counter-productive system
That doesn’t give a fuck
You deserve healing and peace
A meaningful life
Not held back at all
By trauma and strife
It’s hard to observe
From my distant cell
From all that D.A. tries
To preserve you in hell
I fail to see consideration in that
Not that I get to talk
I’ve had to combat
My own selfish needs
To have vengeance
And closure
Would you ever allow me
One moment to convey
How one does not lead to the other
I’ve learned the hard way
I know I may sound
Self-serving and trite
But I’ve felt how you do
Over decades at night
The hate, rage, and fear
Will only devour you slowly

I know it feels righteous
I know it feels lonely
You don’t need to live
in a miserable way
I lived in that prison
Before throwing life away
And where did that get me?
The physical bricks
So much razor-wire
Controlled by dumb union hicks
Yet still I could cultivate
By some internal power
A life I love living
Friends, self respect
Direction, purpose
I’m sorry it took me so long to care
Could you possibly ever allow me
to share
My healing with you
The peace and the calm
Life always survives, thrives,
goes on
And just like I don’t want to define
My whole life by my horrible crime
Neither do I desire for you
To be seen as a victim all your days, too
We could do so much
If we came together
Seeing the truths
Of being only human.

Credit: Daiara Tukano, “Scarlet Macaw”
Dearest Mama,

On October 8, 1988, my whole world collapsed and died when you took your last breath. I did not see it coming. I stayed adrift in sorrow for decades. I could not step into any good thing for too long, believing I was unworthy. There were emotional blows that kept me in denial. I understand what that means now so I feel comfortable acknowledging my frailties.

You were a good Mama. You filled me with love and courage. I did not understand adoption nor your refusal to recognize my need for the truth surrounding mine. I am working through the onslaught of mental mania everyday, as I choose sobriety and truth over chaos and misery. Taking more time for prayer and forgiveness means I am looking at every part of the sum of my whole and in doing that on a regular basis perhaps, prayerfully so, I will excise the taunts which reverberate within my essence. I know you love me! I will not listen to the voices, screaming within, lying to me about you.

There continue to be many times my eyes cannot contain the impulsivity of tears flowing down my face because of the trail of destruction I have left. No memory has faded of the times you tried to show me how to be strong, good and of a noble character. On all levels I failed.

Suffice it to say that as I sit here, in prison, the lessons you taught me forever sting of the righteousness that I missed. I apologize. You told me to never say I was sorry. You said, “There is not one sorry bone in your body.” I didn’t believe you then. However I now know the difference and these walls which hold me have shifted and I gaze upon a new kind of freedom... the freedom to love myself in all that was as I step closer to GOD ALMIGHTY and HIS plan for me.

The TRUTH which came daily from you in large doses resonates through every fiber of my being and I am grateful. Grateful for what I now have, grateful for love as I now know it and especially grateful that before I leave this earth I have the opportunity to see more of what you told me life could be filled with: love surpassing all others, mercy for my tragedies and peace filling my mind, mouth and movements.

Thank you Mama for all of you! The resilience and epic faith you showered upon me has been unearthed in this sobriety and I needed, even now, to send forth this letter of love. As I close I shall carry no worries of the past. I am urged on to see more than what I am and these blessings I’m assured, are because of you. I miss you and cannot wait to walk the Heavens with you, my Mama.

Love to you Forevermore

Delina

An Open Letter
by Delina Williams

Credit: Bruce Bainbridge
They say “don’t cage yourself in the pessimistic and victim mindset of racial inequalities” and so I do my best to grow and believe that I am capable of whatever I set my mind to do. They say “dream and dream big,” not really understanding the nightmare.

On January 6th, 2021, the United States capitol was raided by a gang of racists, a hate crime like no other. As I watched the President of the United States urge the mob to go to the capitol and “fight like hell” I thought Oh, boy that is masterminding at its best. And then I watch as a flood of men and women begin to throw and kick at officers and barriers. I thought instantly had that been a Black or Brown mob we would have been shot on the spot. There would be no way a Black mob would have been able to walk down the street with an AK47 strapped to his back. Immediately someone would have “feared for their lives” and shot all of his comrades dead and they would have NEVER ever made it up to the Capitol stairs. NEVER.

Now back to the lecture at hand. How can I dream when it is clear who and what role I fit in. I want to believe when people see the color of my skin it doesn’t mean I won’t get the job, I won’t get pulled over, and on a personal note I want to believe my race had nothing to do with my sentence. I watched the President coerce people into a riot that led to death. Now the judicial system has reasonable doubt, probable consequences, major participants and aiding and abetting laws. Did the president not foresee his words would cause such atrocities? Had a Black or Brown man or woman said the very same sentence, “let’s go and fight like hell,” we would be charged with at least aiding and abetting murder, attempted murder, mayhem, burglary, causing great bodily harm, with intent to kill all for the benefit of a gang. We’d be sitting in a jail cell waiting years for a trial that already had a sentence for us.

So, no you’re wrong to say I have a pessimistic outlook on racial equality. It is what it is and that is that Blacks and Browns are throw-away people -- kill them or lock them up forever is the American motto. I set my mind to dream a way out of this nightmare.
Niña do not be ashamed... your parents may not know English, they will do everything in their power to make sure you succeed.

Mija don’t compare your home to that of others. Your home is full of culture and love.

Sí se puede and don’t let them tell you any different. You are a dreamer & accomplisher. They say go back to where you came from but remember your ancestors were here first, your tias & abuelos were the ones who built the state of California. You belong

Mujer you are the descendant of Princess warriors. You will not be torn down or looked down upon. You too belong in that corporate office, that senate floor; that presidential seat. You belong.

Señora don’t let our culture die...teach Us por favor...they cannot build a wall around our hearts.

They call us servants, gang members, rapists and drug dealers. Do not accept that hate and remember tus abuelos served this military, your padre worked from sunup and way beyond sunset. Mamá made sure you had a home cooked meal on the table.

Do not be ashamed eres latina eres Americana and you belong.
Hello Mr. President,
Not so presidential!
Your hate is without precedent
In the white house residential.
Not my president!
As I’m transgender!
I doubt you know my struggle
Like fruit in a blender
Chopped and skewed
Behind enemy lines!
Walls, fences, and razor wire,
Still paying monetary fines!
‘Restitution’ to the vampires,
Also known as ‘the State’
In Salinas Valley State Prison
Not knowing my eventual fate??
I ask you to pause…
Stop and consider the laws
Which protect your property
And bloody your greedy paws,
But apparently don’t apply
To poor peoples’ rights!?
The laws don’t protect
Black trans lives or so called gay rights
Donald Trump, I ask
You to stop this madness!
No wall, no ban!
And please stop Fascist violence!

Previously posted on BetweenTheBars.
A message to the youth: the problem & the solution  by MWalimu Shakur

In today’s society you see people being materialistic and wanting to live a lavish lifestyle. But they don’t know the real meaning behind this system, nor Why it was designed to work this way. What’s missing is re-education, and those who are conscious need to step up and help the ones who clearly have been misguided to think that chasing wealth is the way to go.

What we on the inside of the razor wire slave plantation have done is to re-educate ourselves and transform our minds from Gangsters, pimps, Drug Dealers, Hustlers (and every other form of Criminal behavior), into the revolutionary mindset which clearly sees the problems that are hurting us in the inner city communities. And we know how to solve them. Studying all history, sociology, politics, economics, and cultural studies, will show you why Black folks, First nation people, Mexicans and poor whites were fighting in the 60’s so strongly against the Government. It was due to their condition of being oppressed, not to gain wealth.

Credit: Kevin Cooper, San Quentin Death Row

Those in power will only continue to get richer, while only a small few see wealth, not your whole community. Just look at who owns all the sport teams, the media outlets, the big corporations, the music companies, the clothing lines. The few who get wealth by degrading themselves as strippers, drug dealers, pimps and all the negative ways we live, turn right around and give the money back to the ones oppressing them by buying their houses, cars, clothes and jewelry. While the rest end up dead, or in prison for chasing a dream. We can’t continue to fall into these traps designed to control us and eventually destroy us.

It’s time for activists, organizers, and community leaders to step up and re-educate our youth about their condition, and help them over.
This open letter is to my people, to open our minds, spirits and souls to our existence and our historic contributions as a people of the Human Tree of Life. To American Afrikhans and Afrikhans all over the planet who share in a movement founded in economic, socio-cultural, political, nationalist and revolutionary ideology; in our core values of justice, equality and liberation from all forms of oppression, suppression, repression and depression.

Acknowledging those scholars before me, my open letter is inspired by the writings of: W.E.B. Du Bois, who began to create the Africana Encyclopedia completed by Henry Louis Gates and Mr. Appiah; Mr. James Baldwin and his writing, *The Fire Next Time*; and the beloved dragon brotha Khatari J. Glaudin writing the Black Tempest in 1972.

Our Black Power movement of the late 60 and 1970s and our Hip Hop movement of the late 1970s and 1980s brought back socio-economic systems of distribution and circulation of wealth, building renewal. Our beacon now is Atlanta, the new Black Wall Street. We need to use Atlanta as an example to encourage our successful folk to invest in our communities for us to prosper as a whole. We allow outsiders to purchase large parts of our communities for little to nothing, making them unaffordable for those left. There’s NO excuses now; we have the wealth, the intellect, the ability to build our communities, the political know-how and experience to purchase our freedom in the names of our Afrikhan/Black Ancestors!

We must bring the will to win and the fire this time to get it done. We must come as bold women and men, fearless, while we are being attacked from all sides. We come as Afrikhan/Black fire breathing dragons to protect our communities and destroy the corruptness of our enemies and their lies about us, no matter who the enemy is—inside or outside. Let’s not wait for our next generation to fight our battles—we fight Now! There are dreams and debts owed to our Ancestors we must make right—we!

One dragon be here, one of the last Black Guerilla fighters standing on our principles for freedom, justice, equality and liberation from all forms of oppression. Onwards we build.
Biographies

BAMBARI SAMUEL
KELLY ANDERSON

Bambari is one of 73 people in CA state prisons who served over 25 years in isolation in the Security Housing Unit (SHU). Mr. Anderson was a participant in the historic 2013 Pelican Bay Hunger Strike that united thousands of people incarcerated throughout CA, demanding an end to the cruel and unusual punishment of endless and arbitrary solitary confinement. On June 8, 2023, Bambari was approved for parole after 32 years of incarceration. He is now continuing to contribute to his community from outside prison.

TAMARA HINKLE

I’ve been incarcerated for 28.5 years on a Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentence. Growing up, I was silenced by a pedophile after speaking out about being molested. Writing became my voice. The child of a West Indian father, I was raised in Montego Bay, Jamaica as Rastafarian. My parents instilled in me the love of my ethnicity, culture and ancestors. When I saw the Open Letter Project, I embraced the chance to learn about other writers who, like me, were resilient in the face of adversity.
LAURA LUTRELL PURVIANCE

Laura Lutrell Purviance is an artist, writer, advocate, consultant, educator and collaborator on numerous political and multimedia projects. She is a current student in the Cal State L.A. Bachelor’s in Liberal Studies program and Entrepreneur In Training with Defy Ventures. Laura has read over 600 books in her decade of incarceration and has lots of opinionated insights she enjoys sharing to maintain a semblance of sanity and connection to the world while in prison with a 50-Life sentence. Freedom is a mindset, prison is not the only prison. Peace & love

JENNIFER ROSE

I’m a white identified part Native/Cherokee, two spirit trans woman. Born and raised in southern CA, I was an 80’s punk rocker. I have been incarcerated for over 30 years. I became politicized during the 1991 Folsom Prison strike and a decade of long-term solitary confinement at Folsom and Pelican Bay SHU, where I experienced brutality and torture. I’m a jailhouse lawyer, college undergrad, paralegal student and an anarchist who co-founded the FineAnt Collective. I hope to attend SF State University upon release. For now, I continue to be involved in several community organizations, including Initiate Justice and Trans Gender Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP).
Handcuffed and shackled, sitting in the back of the transport van, I couldn’t believe that I would soon arrive at the state prison where I would spend years, perhaps the rest of my life. I prayed to God. I have learned that I AM responsible for the well-being of each man, woman and child that I am blessed to meet. That’s how I have lived my life in SCI Muncy (a Pennsylvania state prison), and that’s how I will continue to live my life until my final days.

Note: Joyce Schofield passed away on Thanksgiving Day, 2023. She was 72 years old and had been incarcerated on a LWOP sentence since 2000. Rest in Peace, Joyce.

In Memory of Joyce

“Dr. Julia G. Hall Inmate of the Year is awarded to Joyce Schofield. For many years, she has been a hospice volunteer in the SCI Muncy infirmary providing kind and caring support to seriously ill inmates. She assists other inmates with legal issues, including parole forms and commutation applications. She has been active in numerous activities including: the Lifer’s Group, Cage Your Rage program, citizenship and volunteer courses, the Inmate Buddy Program, Support and Care for Terminally Ill Inmates, mentor special needs inmates, Prison Society’s STEP Program, HAPPY MATS Program, and Community Service Program. Her other services include: Restorative Justice Group facilitator, Educational Tutor for GED, Math, Algebra, History, Science; Outpatient Alcohol & Drugs Peer Assistant; and Lifers Long Term Offenders Peer Assistant Librarian Aid.”

Words from A Publication of the Pennsylvania Prison Society (Summer 2017, Volume 47, Issue 4).
Opening my mind to various writings has allowed my creative understanding to flourish. Literacy has to be the answer for so many ills which permeate our society now. It is key that our future is not defined by someone else’s idea of life policy, but by the agreements made when educated minds meet. This is where I see a positive possibility coming from the wreckage of my past. I am definitely being proactive and moving towards freedom, if only in my dreams.

MWALIMU SHAKUR

MWalimu Shakur is a New African Freedom Fighter who was incarcerated for 20 years. He joined almost 30,000 hunger strikers in 2013 in an historic hunger strike by incarcerated people throughout the California prison system to put an end to cruel, indefinite solitary confinement. MWalimu – an advocate, mentor and teacher-has obtained a paralegal certification and specializes in civil litigation. Mwalimu was released from prison in December 2023.

DELINA WILLIAMS

Opening my mind to various writings has allowed my creative understanding to flourish. Literacy has to be the answer for so many ills which permeate our society now. It is key that our future is not defined by someone else’s idea of life policy, but by the agreements made when educated minds meet. This is where I see a positive possibility coming from the wreckage of my past. I am definitely being proactive and moving towards freedom, if only in my dreams.
Letty with her daughter.

**LETTY ZEPEDA**

My name is Leticia but everyone aside from my abuela calls me Letty. I entered the school to prison pipeline fairly early, and after years of foster homes, group placements, juvenile hall, boot camp, domestic violence, rape, addiction and gangs I now find myself serving a double life sentence for the murder of a young man. I made a decision on the bus ride to prison that I would do everything in my power to change who I had become, to get to the core of my resentments and trauma and be the woman I was capable of being. Fourteen years later I am a certified drug and alcohol counselor through the offender mentorship certification program, I have earned three Associates Degrees, am working on a BA with Cal State Los Angeles, and most importantly I have been able to show up for my children and make amends to the people I have harmed. I have learned to forgive, be still, serve those in need, and no matter what I do not use. My belief is that I still have a purpose and I continue to grow despite geography. I do my best...I keep my head to the sky!
The call for the Open Letters Writing Group went out in The Fire Inside’s issue no. 62 in December 2020. Twenty incarcerated individuals wrote in, seventeen women and three men. Over a year-long process, members of the Open Letters Writing Group began with reading more than a dozen well-known open letters and writing reflections about an open letter of their choosing. From there, Ben, Pam, and Ray paired writers together to share their work with each other and to exchange feedback. Ben coordinated this peer-to-peer feedback. A feedback form was sent out along with a writer’s work, so the reader could explain what resonated with them most and to offer other suggestions to help edit and strengthen the writers’ letters. Most often, these were exchanges of affirmation and care.

As writer Letty wrote about Tamara’s Where I’m From letter: “Tamara’s love, pain, optimism, and faith came roaring off the paper. Tamara, believe what you write every second of the blessed day!” Tamara responded to Letty’s open letter affirming Latina women in the face of Trump’s racism and xenophobia. Letty’s ability to “see systematic racism for what it is, yet dare to dream of a better life” was deeply moving to Tamara.

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

Many writers were inspired by and reflected on several published open letters before writing their own. Throughout this group process, writer-pairs exchanged feedback to help each person edit their first to final drafts. The peer foundation of the open letters group was intentional and built on a cooperative process that people in prison create in opposition to the PIC.
1. Imani Perry, Breathe: A Letter to My Sons (2019)
3. Alicia Garza, Dear Mama Harriet (2016)
4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (Open Letter to his Son, 2015)
15. Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963)
16. Claudia Jones, To Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and For Consuela (1955)
17. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Farewell to Claudia (1955)
18. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, To Anti-Lynching Bureau (1902)
19. David Walker, Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829)