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## Voz y Lucha: Latinas, Incarceration, & Writing

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### Cover Page Footnote

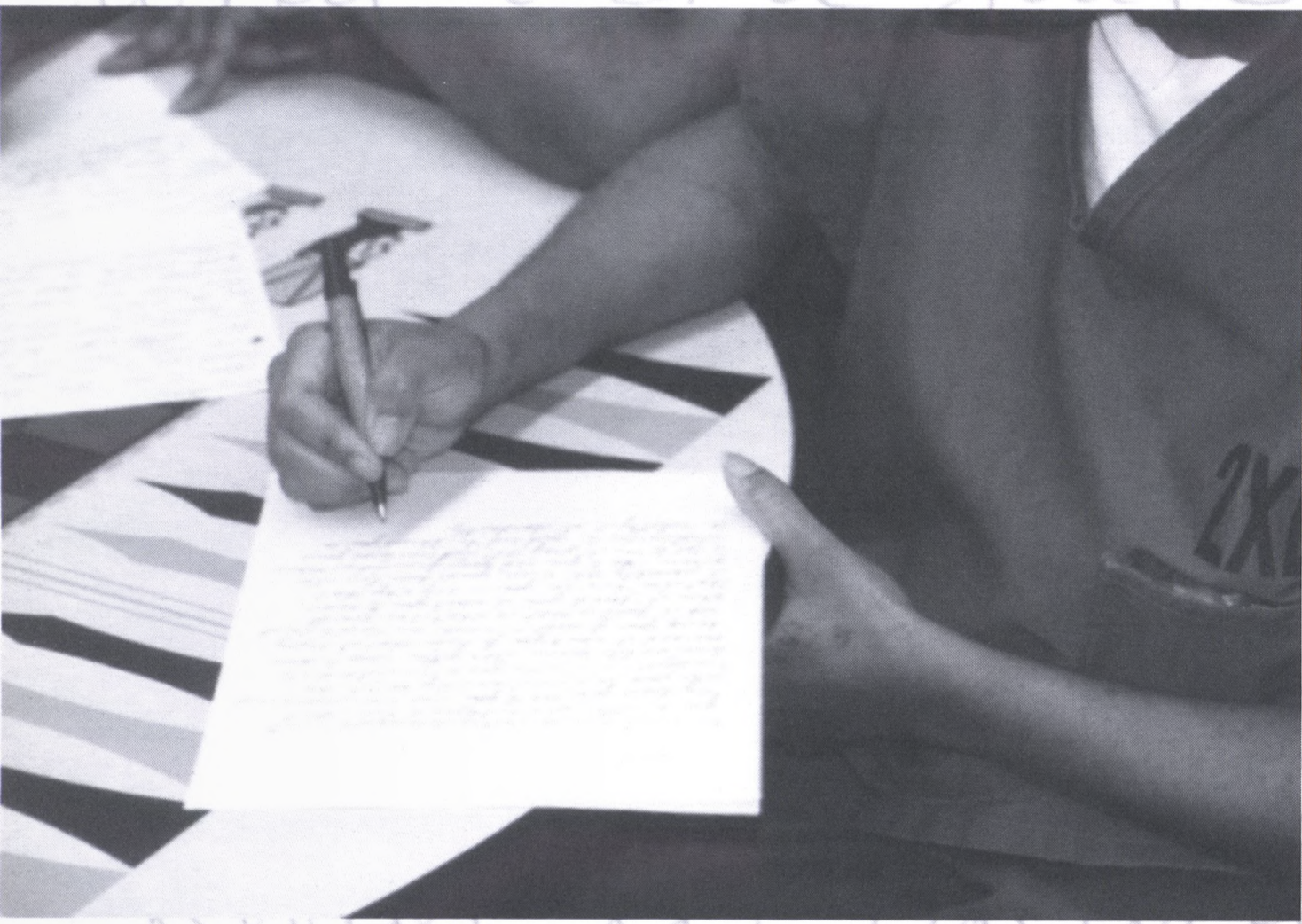
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# Voz y Lucha:

## Latinas,

## Incarceration, & Writing

By Ann Folwell Stanford



What's especially troubling is that at least half the population is serving time for non-violent and often petty crimes. The "war on crime" has become, in

effect, a war on economically and educationally disadvantaged people. "At every juncture of the criminal justice system whites receive disproportionately lenient outcomes while non-whites are many times more likely to be arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated," says Barry Holman, director of public policy, the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives.<sup>3</sup> Admission to prisons for drug offenses increased an unimaginable 1,040% between 1986 and 1996.<sup>4</sup> Keep in mind that while African American rates of incarceration are 9 times that of whites and Latinos are imprisoned at 4 times greater, rates of drug consumption are virtually *equal* among the three groups.<sup>5</sup>

Up until recently, Latinos and Latinas in many state and federal prisons were counted as whites, obscuring the huge racial disparity that exists. "Counting Hispanic/Latinos as whites hides the magnitude of incarceration of people of color," says Holman. For example, in Illinois, the prison population increased

by 22,154 between 1985 and 1997. The percent of increase was 82.2% for non-white but only 17.8 for white, non-Hispanic. "What has been rather antiseptically referred to as a 'racial disparity' is really a gaping divide between whites and non-whites that far outstrips minority levels in the population or in committing crime," Holman asserts.<sup>6</sup>

Juanita Diaz-Cotto points out several reasons it has been difficult to know exact statistics on incarcerated Latino women and men.

- If data is compiled by racial/ethnic composition, it may not be released
- Latinos are frequently classified as black, white, or other, depending on skin color
- At times all Latinos are all classified as "Puerto Ricans"
- When language and self-identification is the criteria, there are problems because many Latinos, especially in the U.S., do not speak Spanish or may hide their identities for fear of deportation or shame about being Latino<sup>7</sup>

Being confined in jail or prison is its own kind of hell—harsh conditions, uniforms, being known by a number, and living a lock-step existence determined by those who manage daily life—guards, officers, superintendents. Imagine speaking Spanish and being locked up in an almost exclusively English-speaking world, or serving an extended sentence several thousand miles away from family and friends, and the trauma of imprisonment multiplies.

The United States now incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world. In 2000, the number of adults behind bars, on parole, or probation reached 6.57 million—one in every 32 Americans, according to the Bureau of Justice.<sup>1</sup> In 1998 alone, the cost to taxpayers for prisons was just under \$9 billion. (In several states, the budget for prisons is greater than that for education.) The imprisonment of people of color accounted for no less than seventy percent of this growth.<sup>2</sup>

my name is Michelle  
Lopez

The rate of women's incarceration has tripled in the last 10 years and the majority of convictions are for non-violent crimes. At least two-thirds of the women in prison are mothers to children under the age of 18, and are often single parents.<sup>8</sup> Their incarceration becomes extremely disruptive of children (who are placed in foster care if another family member is not available to take them). The emotional toll this takes on mothers and children is intensified, since federal legislation places limits on the length of time that children can be in foster care before parental rights are terminated, increasing the likelihood that women serving long prison terms will lose their children. In addition, women in prison show high rates of substance abuse and dramatically high levels of physical and sexual abuse. More than half (57%) have been abused, including 47% who have been abused physically and 39% sexually (many have survived both types).<sup>9</sup> Even in the face of such statistics, any ideas of rehabilitation (and real help) that might have existed in the prison industrial complex, have given way to a blatant ideology of punishment in most institutions.

Latina women have been especially invisible within the system, since most population counts do not break down the ethnic/racial categories by sex (even NCI's report does not consider sex). "Their plight," says Diaz-Cotto, "continues to be 'basically ignored.'"<sup>10</sup> Latinas without English are at special risk for discriminating practices by guards and other prison officials—even by their cell- or tier-mates.

Diaz-Cotto adds that incarcerated women of all ethnicities share in common the fact that many perceive their actions "as the result of their inability to adapt to their socially-prescribed roles of dutiful wives, mothers, daughters."<sup>11</sup> Thus, much of the discourse of "rehabilitation," when it exists, focuses on those roles and programming tends to emphasize traditional skills: laundry, cooking, childcare. One way incarcerated women

can begin to rethink and revise the prescribed discourse is through writing.

The poems and narratives published as part of this article represent the work of two Latina women who participated in the "Windows to Freedom" creative writing workshops at Cook County Jail.<sup>12</sup> The workshops usually involve ten women for 4-6 weeks and in them, participants use various prompts and poetry to help get started with their own writing—workshop leaders and visitors, as well as the women in "the County" all write and read their work together around a table in the small library on the first floor of Women's Division 4. Michelle Lopez and Lucretia Ortiz both participated in such workshops. Lopez is now incarcerated in Lincoln, Illinois. Her family lives in California and it is not possible for them to visit. Ortiz lives in Chicago, and her story is not unlike many Latinas in jails and prisons. In addition, she was relatively isolated living with her tier-mates, most of whom spoke no Spanish.<sup>13</sup>

The experience of incarceration becomes a daily struggle to maintain selfhood and to survive inside an alienating system. One reads in this work tremendous courage, the longing for home and family, and the desire to live in freedom and safety. The writers scrutinize their life-paths and attempt to rewrite the defeating narratives often constructed about them by an unforgiving and, in many instances, ignorant, society.

About incarceration, one thing these and other writers from the inside teach us on the outside: the experience radically disrupts, even splinters, the ongoing narrative of one's life. Writing becomes an act of resistance to dehumanization and a powerful way to reconstruct one's story, to make sense of a frequently senseless experience, and to create solidarity through the sharing of those stories with others. Lopez and Ortiz can teach those of us on the other side of the razor wire much about humanity, ourselves, our ignorance, and possibly, about creating a more just and humane world.

- 1 Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>
- 2 Holman, Barry. "Masking the Divide: How Officially Reported Prison Statistics Distort the Racial and Ethnic Realities of Prison Growth," National Center on Institutions and Alternatives. <http://www.igc.org/ncia/mask.html>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Diaz-Cotto, Jaunita. *Gender, Ethnicity, and the State: Latina and Latino Prison Politics*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996.
- 8 Mauer, Marc, Cathy Potler, and Richard Wolf. "Gender and Justice: Women, Drugs, and Sentencing Policy." November 1999. The Sentencing Project, 1516 P Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20005.
- 9 Ibid. These are conservative figures. Other estimates are as high as 80%.
- 10 Diaz-Cotto.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Sr. Patricia Schlosser and a group of volunteers began this program in 1996, creating a library with the help of donations and a grant of books from Women and Children First bookstore. WTF includes domestic violence workshops, theatre and writing workshops, and other educational programs for the women.
- 13 I am grateful to Michele Lopez and Lucretia Ortiz for their participation in the Cook County Division 4 workshops and for their permission to print their work in *Diálogo*.

