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Building from Within: How Two Female Prisoners Survived Incarceration

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Abstract

According to the US Commission of Civil Rights, from 1980 to 2016, the percentage of imprisoned women surpassed 730% (4). Severe isolation, lack of sunlight, and sensory deprivation tactics were employed during the 1980s, when Silvia Baraldini and Laura Whitehorn were incarcerated at the federal women's prison in Lexington, Kentucky. Both women maintained their basic humanity and spirit by creating educational opportunities for fellow inmates, advocating for improved conditions, and sharing their experiences through letter writing. They each wrote hundreds of letters to friends, family, and other social activists concerned with their plight. Using a collection of letters written by Baraldini and Whitehorn, dating from 1987 to 2000, now part of the Kate Black Social Activism Papers at the University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center, this research will explore the work, activity, and mental health of these women during their incarceration. While Whitehorn was mainly concerned with health education, especially regarding the burgeoning health crisis of HIV and AIDS, Baraldini's advocacy focused on reform of current incarceration tactics, like the High Security Unit in the Lexington prison. Because of Baraldini's efforts, with support from Amnesty International, the High Security Unit at Lexington's Federal Correctional Institution was shut down in 1988. This research relates Baraldini and Whitehorn's activism to studies on how prison systems treat women prisoners differently than male prisoners, whether they receive more extreme punishments, and the nature of those punishments. In light of the current prison system, Baraldini and Whitehorn offer examples of how women maintain their humanity while incarcerated.

Life Before Prison: Activists in Formation

Although both women were born in different parts of the world, their activism was driven by the same causes. Among them, they:

- Supported the Black, Puerto Rican, anti-war, and civil right movements.
- Co-founded feminist education and consciousness raising groups.
- Were members of Students for a Democratic Society, during college.

After college, Laura Whitehorn became a member of the radical group Weather Underground. She was arrested in 1985 for weapons possession and was prosecuted for conspiracy and bombing charges.
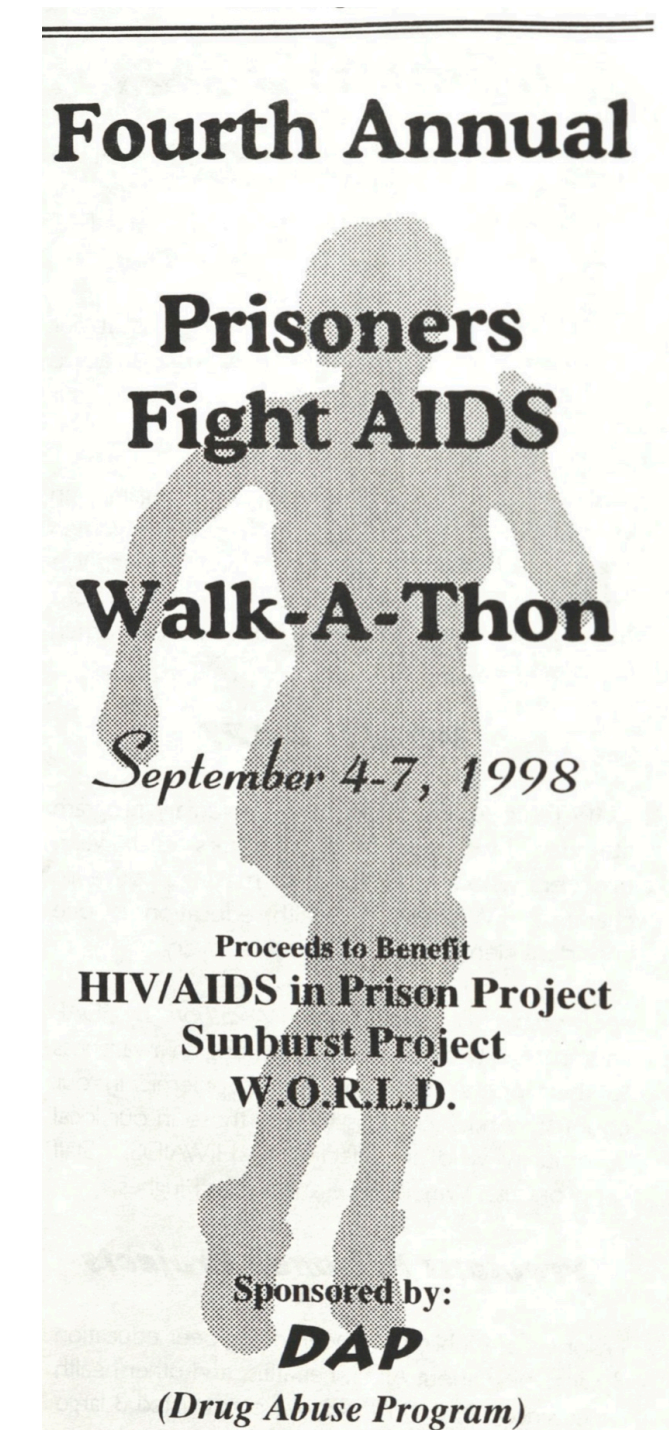
Silvia Baraldini became part of the Black Liberation Army's defense team, taking part in the prison break of Assata Shakur, the leader of said movement. In 1982, she was sentenced to 43 years for conspiracy and criminal contempt.

Laura Whitehorn appeared in Sojourner: The Women's Forum, February 1989. Kate Black Social Activism Papers, University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center.

While in prison, these women witnessed physical abuse from correctional officers, how AIDS affected their loved ones in and out of prison, and the medical mistreatment of inmates.
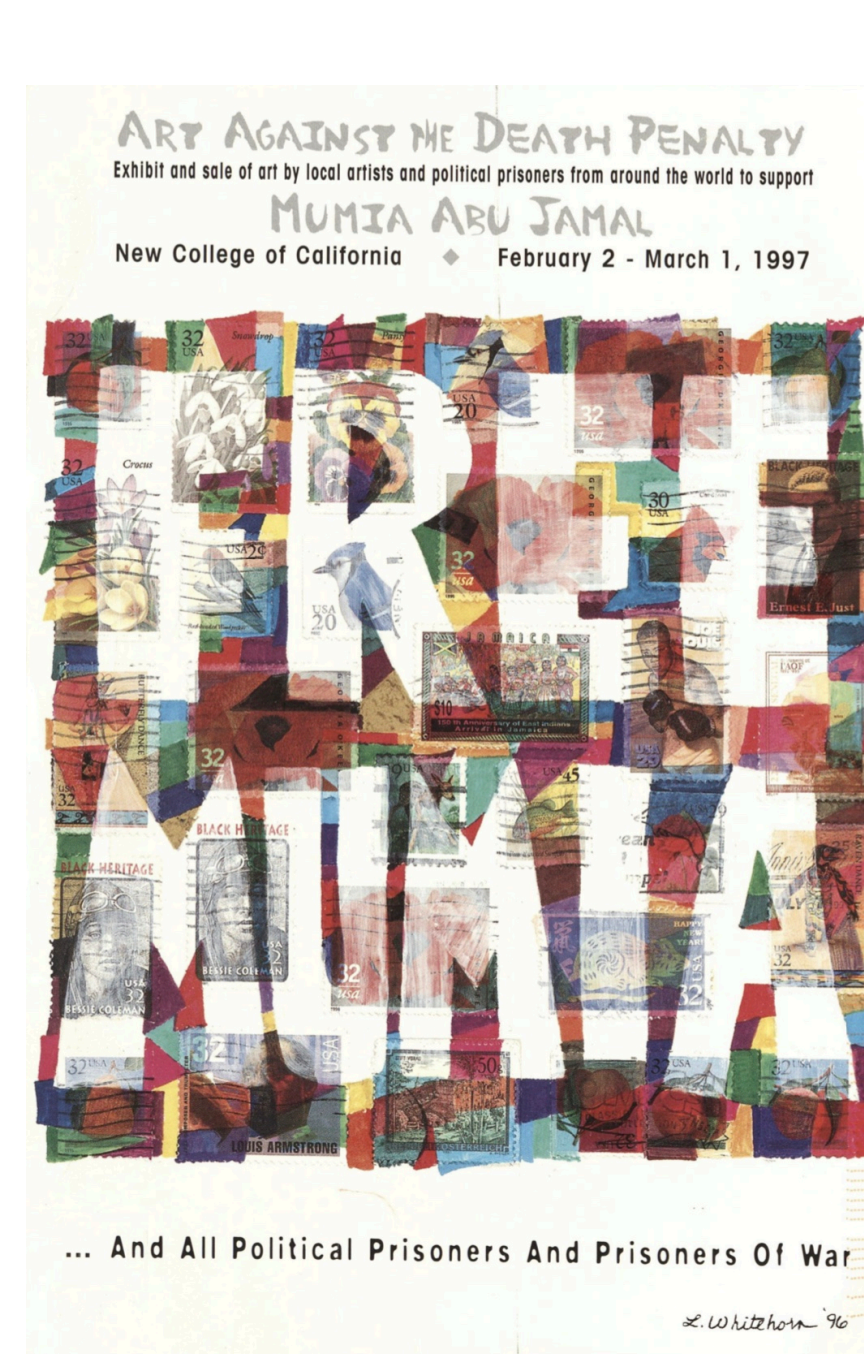
Activism Within Prison Walls

Even though Baraldini and Whitehorn were white women, their feminism in and out of prison walls was multiracial. They worked primarily with women of color to teach others that race, class, and gender are inseparable and must be acknowledged in liberation movements (Thompson 337, 342, 347, 349).
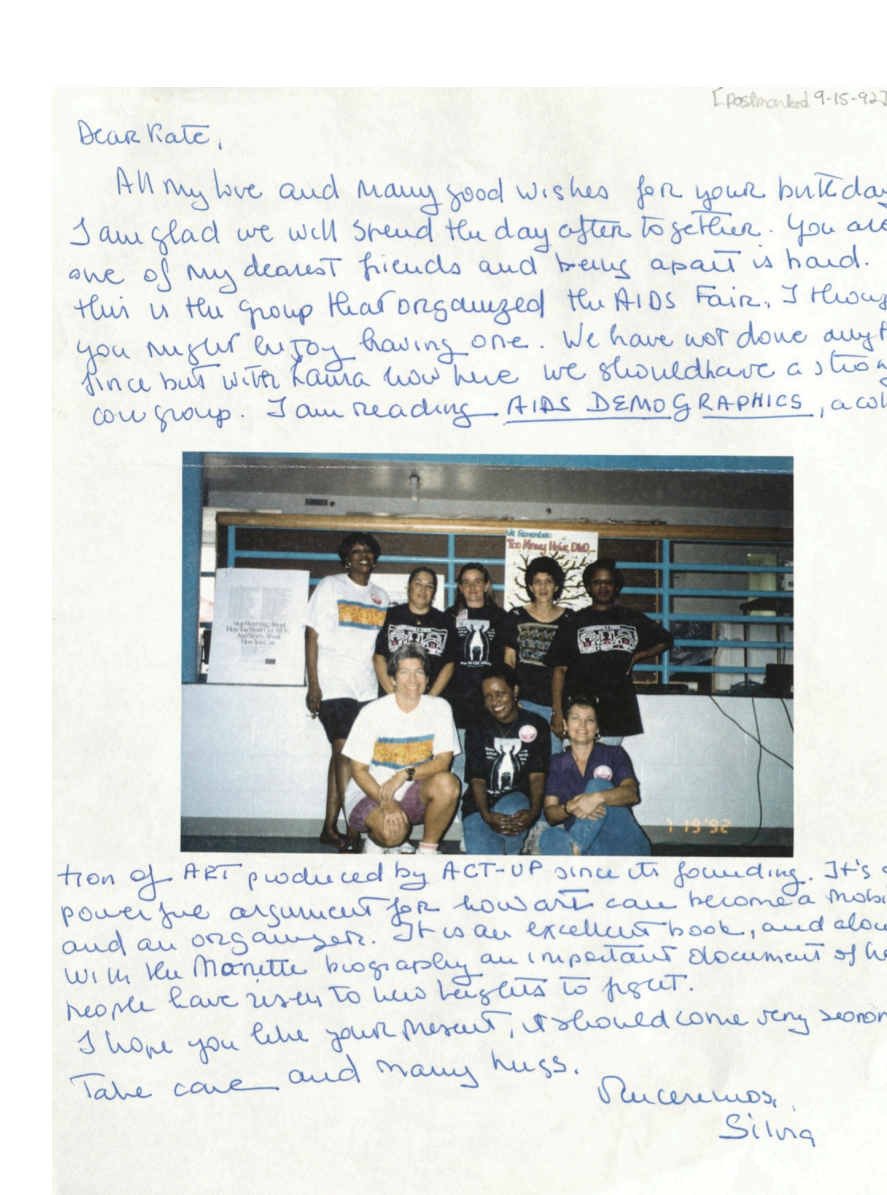
In the 1980s, Baraldini was transferred to the High Security Unit at a federal prison in Lexington, Kentucky. She and other prisoners were subjected to solitary confinement and a lawsuit was filed against the Federal Bureau of Prisons on their behalf. The women were evaluated by the psychologist Dr. Richard Korn. Among the reported symptoms present in the women were: significant weight loss, visual disturbances and general physical malaise (16). With the support of multiple organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International, the Unit was deemed unconstitutional by a judge and was shut down. Baraldini's effort did not stop there.

Fourth Annual Prisoners Fight AIDS Walk-A-Thon
September 4-7, 1998
Proceeds to Benefit HIV/AIDS in Prison Project Sunburst Project W.O.R.L.D.
Sponsored by: DAP (Drug Abuse Program)

Brochure of a Walk-A-Thon held in prison in support of AIDs

Artwork made by Laura Whitehorn in support of Mumia Abu Jamal.

Letter written by Baraldini encased with a picture of her (bottom left) and members of the AIDS advocacy group she helped organized in prison.

Baraldini participated in HIV/AIDS peer advocacy groups throughout her time in prison, just like Laura Whitehorn.

As a woman, prisoner, and a lesbian, the AIDS epidemic devasted Laura Whitehorn deeply. Imprisoned during AIDS epidemic, she saw firsthand how inmates with AIDS were affected. In her writings, she expresses, "...the only way I could deal with my grief... was to throw myself with a vengeance with AIDS education, support, and (to the extent it's possible in prison) activism."

- Studies have suggested that emotional and social support is crucial for the health and well-being of imprisoned women (Severance 359). They also note that establishing relationships with other inmates benefits women prisoners. Peer advocacy programs, such as AIDS awareness, help women find support during stressful times. Participation in these programs have proven to lower HIV infection risk and misconduct among prisoners (Collica-Cox 935).

Not only did these women focus on AIDS awareness, but they also advocated for the release of other prisoners like Mumia Abu Jamal, a journalist from Philadelphia who was on death row.

Being activists was an important part of their life and was not easy to do from prison. Baraldini's letters attest to this, "For those of us who do the work in prison, we expect being ignored and left to fend for ourselves."

Gender Disparities in Prison

Prisons were generally made with men in mind. In their 2020 report, the United States Commission on Civil Rights states that female inmates:

- Make up only 7% of the prison population overall in the United States.
- Tend to come from different backgrounds as men, they are more likely to suffer from substance abuse, trauma from sexual and/or physical abuse, and mental disorders than men.
- Have different health needs than men such as, "menopause, need for cervical and breast cancer screenings, reproductive medical care, and pregnancy needs—including pre-natal and postpartum care."
- More likely to be sentenced for non-violent crimes, compared to men.
- Oftentimes, they receive more disciplinary action and grave consequences for their actions than male inmates (4,10,17,124).

Researchers have found that part of the reason that female inmates are disciplined harsher than male inmates is due to correctional staff thinking that women are too emotional, neurotic, irrational and too vocal (Collica-Cox 933-944). Furthermore, Collica-Cox states that the behavior that is severely punished in female prisons is the same behavior often ignored in male institutions. The researcher argues that female inmate behavior is not any worse than male prisoners' behavior, but their behavior is noticed more easily by correctional staff.

It is important to account that Whitehorn and Baraldini were white, privileged women who did not share the same background as the female inmates described above. Nonetheless, based on the letters found in the archival collection, they were subjected to similar conditions.

Conclusion

Imprisonment can take a physical and psychological toll, especially if the inmate does not count with a support system. Laura Whitehorn and Silvia Baraldini were able to build a support system within prison walls through their activism, writing, and HIV/AIDS peer advocacy groups. They managed to ground themselves in a place where losing your sense of self can be easy. The work and lives of these women offer a take on the realities experienced in prison every day and prompt us to reflect on the contemporary treatment of female inmates.

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