Unconditional

Exploring a Mother's Love in Two Inadequate Representational Systems

by

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Author's Declaration

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Abstract

The loss of a child is unarguably devastating. But what happens when a mother loses her child to the prison system? *Unconditional* is a multimedia project that explores the experiences of women whose children are in prison. While the incarceration of a loved one is devastating for all members of a family, mothers in particular bear the weight of responsibility and blame for their child's behaviour. This project seeks to understand the complicated feelings of grief, shame, and helplessness that mothers go through when their child is arrested. *Unconditional* demonstrates the incredible bond between mother and child that remains unshaken, even in the most extreme of circumstances.

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Finally, to my grandmother I owe immeasurable gratitude. She has inspired me more ways than I could count, and I could never thank her enough for supporting me and believing in me—even when many others did not. She has taught me the power of storytelling, the importance of open-mindedness, and that it is brave to be vulnerable. If I have inherited even a fraction of her capacity for empathy, then I am fortunate.

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Introduction

In 2014 my uncle was arrested for the first time for possession of opioids with intent to distribute. This was not Rick's first run-in with the law— he had been in and out of jail for driving under the influence or disorderly conduct since he was a teenager— but this time he would serve a sentence of almost an entire year in a state jail. Rick's arrest was not easy on the family; we all struggled with a combination of conflicting feelings, ranging from anger to pity to relief. And things did not get easier when Rick was eventually released. He was unable to find meaningful employment due to his criminal record, and was soon arrested once again for possession and distribution. This time, because Rick had broken his parole and had offended multiple times in a short period, he was facing a very long sentence. My grandmother,¹ who was 77-years-old at the time, was concerned that she would never see her son a free man again. Not only that, but due to progressive fibromyalgia, my grandmother could barely leave the house to visit her son in prison, and also could no longer afford to accept his collect calls from prison. Rick was still alive, but my grandmother found herself grieving the loss of her son— a feeling additionally complicated by the knowledge that it was Rick's own behaviour that led to his removal and the extensive pain and financial hardship endured by his family and friends.

My grandmother is a tough, opinionated woman who fought hard to work her way out of poverty in the backwoods of the Appalachian Mountains. My mother is a similarly opinionated, tough woman, who has also fought hard to rise to success as a woman in engineering. She has always attributed her success to my grandmother. And yet, there is my grandmother's son, Rick, who is currently serving an extensive prison sentence. I have seen the way people respond to my

¹ See Appendix A.1.

grandmother when they meet her after knowing my mother—they admire her strength and find her country mannerisms charming. Conversely, when people meet my grandmother after knowing my uncle, they see her as obstinate, incompetent in domestic responsibilities and an example of a failing American class system. These dichotomous images of my grandmother seemed to me to be both reductive and entirely unjust. As exemplified by these contrasting depictions of my grandmother, defining a woman by the actions of her child is also completely unproductive. Contemplating these issues has inspired my work on *Unconditional*.

The assumption that child-bearing is an act of reproduction, a practice that somehow ensures our immortality, is a myth held especially dear by expectant parents requiring reassurance that they are prepared for their future offspring. Rather, however, it is an act of production, and as Andrew Solomon writes, “Parenthood permanently catapults us into a permanent relationship with a stranger”.² Still though, when a child is exceptional, parents gladly take credit for their accomplishments, and so when a child misbehaves, parents are expected to take responsibility for their failures.³ There is comfort in believing that good parenting can prevent a child from performing heinous acts; however, no matter how fiercely we love and protect our children, they still may come to actualize awful things well beyond our imagination.⁴

My major research project explores the experiences of women whose children are currently incarcerated. This multi-media project investigates the lack of support and compassion for mothers of criminals and the systemic problems with the Canadian justice system that lead to

² Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2012), 1.

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

these women being punished for the crimes of their children. The project exists in the form of an online podcast/ photography series⁵ as well as a gallery exhibition.⁶ Each episode of this 6-part series tells the story of a different woman dealing with the emotional turmoil of losing a child to incarceration. I address the ways our society continually expects women in particular to take responsibility for the actions of their children, and explore, from a feminist perspective, how women are continually blamed for the actions of the men in their lives. This project also includes photographic portraits of the six women I have been working with, encouraging the audience to confront their preconceived prejudices about what kind of woman mothers a criminal, and what type of family is plagued by crime.

Chapter 1: Project Content

i. Blaming the Mother

When a child performs in a way that is societally unacceptable, a disproportionate amount of the blame borne by parents is placed upon mothers. Stacey Hannem argues that the experiences of the family members of criminals is highly gendered, and female family members suffer exceptionally after the incarceration of their loved one.⁷ She argues, “These difficulties are the result of a complex intersection of patriarchal norms, the gendered division of labour, and the traditional role of woman as carer [sic].”⁸ The expectation of the mother is that she will protect

⁵ See *Unconditional Podcast*, June 1, 2017, www.unconditionalpodcast.com.

⁶ See Appendix B.

⁷ Stacey Hannem, “Stigma and Marginality: Gendered Experiences of Families of Male Prisoners in Canada,” in *Critical Criminology in Canada: New Voices, New Directions*, ed. Aaron Doyle et al. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 184.

⁸ Ibid, 188.

and care for not only her own child, but also those around her— to produce a murderer is the ultimate failure of her duty as guardian. The power that women assume over their children after becoming mothers is held in stark contrast to their relative powerlessness in a patriarchal society that leaves them with little control over the conditions in which they are mothering. However, it is much easier to blame the mothers of criminals, than look at the societal issues that contributed to their criminal behaviour. Sara Ruddick expands on the idea of mother-blaming further when she writes, “Children confront and rely upon a powerful maternal presence only to watch her become the powerless woman in front of the father, the teacher, the doctor, the judge, the landlord— the world. A child’s rageful disappointment in its powerless mother, combined with resentment and fear of her powerful will, may account for the matriphobia so widespread in our society as to seem normal.”⁹ Many of the women I met while working on this project reflected on their personal experiences with the complicated position of being simultaneously powerless and blamed when it came to the actions of their child. One women I met, Rebecca,¹⁰ told me of her attempt to reconcile the guilt she felt due to her powerlessness in protecting her son from prison:

“I told him that, you know, when you were younger I could always stand in front of you and protect you from anything [...] and I said, I may not be able to protect you right now, because you’re an adult, but I’m not going anywhere [...] I told him, I’m not standing in front of you anymore, but I’m right beside you.”

The gendered blame imposed on mothers of criminals was a theme I noticed amongst the women

I interviewed for this project. One woman in particular, Farhat,¹¹ described to me the painful

⁹ Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” in *Child Nurturance Volume 1: Philosophy, Children, and the Family*, ed. Albert C. Cafagna et al. (New York: Plenum Press, 1982), 102.

¹⁰ See Appendix A.2.

¹¹ See Appendix A.3.

experience of being accused of enabling her son's socially unacceptable behaviour when she cooked him meals and allowed him to stay in bed during a depressive spell, only later to be accused of not being attentive enough to recognize when his behaviour turned criminal. Yet another woman, Jackie,¹² told me of how her ex-sister-in-law had convinced her son that his crime was somehow caused by his mother being too controlling:

“The whole thing is— it’s awful. And you blame yourself. Like what kind of mother am I? [...] how come I didn’t see it? [...] what did I do? What did I miss? [...] And then to have her on top of that blame you, and have everybody blame you... you’re starting to question everything about yourself at the same time. So it was hard, and they don’t make it any easier on you. There’s nothing there that’s easy.”

Other women I spoke with repeated this self-blame and guilt for their child's actions. An added layer of shame was evident in cases where the woman's son had performed an act of violence against a woman. In Dinny's¹³ case, additional confusion and self-doubt arouse from her complicated position as both a survivor of a violent assault as a young woman, and a mother to a man who assaulted and murdered a young woman.

“... and then I have had to think, with Brian, what have I done that has made him think that a woman is not to be respected in the way you would respect another man? Or that you can have what you want from a woman, even if she says no? ‘Cause she was saying no. And how could he grow up in this family and not get it? You know? Not get that [...] but there must be an element of that, or he couldn’t have done it, right?”

It is apparent in Dinny's lamenting that she feels that she is somehow responsible for allowing her son to grow up disrespecting women.

¹² See Appendix A.4.

¹³ See Appendix A.5.

ii. Disenfranchised Grief

While Canada has long-since abandoned capital punishment, the removal of a child for their prison sentence is still felt by parents as a loss. According to research done by the Canadian Families and Corrections Network, “Many family members have serious difficulty reconciling their understanding of the person that they thought they knew with the reality of the crime they have committed. This is a complicated type of loss, made all the more stressful because there is so little societal acknowledgement of the loss experienced by families of offenders, and very little support for them.”¹⁴ The particular type of loss described here has been identified and labeled as “disenfranchised grief” by Kenneth Doka, who defines the phenomenon as, “the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported.”¹⁵ This complicated type of grief leaves mourners in isolation, adding further to their suffering, and because this grief is not socially recognized, systemic barriers can prevent sufferers from emotional recovery. For example, the incarceration of a child is not recognized by most employers as a legitimate reason to take time off work, negatively impacting the mother’s professional performance, and potentially costing her her job (not to mention the emotional burden of being forced to work while mourning this complicated loss of her child).

A lack of understanding on the part of Correctional Service Canada (CSC) of the disenfranchised grief experienced by mothers of criminals also systemically contributes to the perpetuation of undue suffering imposed on these women. Though many women did clarify that

¹⁴ Stacey Hannem and Louise Leonardi, *Forgotten Victims: The Mental Health and Well-Being of Families Affected by Crime and Incarceration in Canada*. Report. (Kingston: Canadian Families and Corrections Network, 2015), 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

some staff members at the prisons they visited were considerate and understanding of their grief, all the mothers I spoke to described painful experiences interacting with prison staff that did not acknowledge their loss and did not understand their desire to maintain their relationship with their child.

iii. Stigma and Facing the Prison System

Often the mothers of criminals express the pain of being treated by prison staff, friends, and family as if they themselves had committed their child's crime. This guilt-by-association is a phenomenon defined by Erving Goffman as "courtesy stigma".¹⁶ Similar to blame, this stigma disproportionately affects women, and especially mothers. Stacey Hannem writes, "This tendency can be traced back to patriarchal beliefs that tend to limit the identities of women to their marital and motherhood roles and thus ties their identities and fates to those of their partners or children. As such, it is likely that the female partners and mothers of male prisoners are more greatly affected by sticky stigma [sic] than other male relatives of prisoners and are more apt to suffer from social isolation."¹⁷ The 'courtesy stigma' placed on women with children in prison leads to practices that further ostracize and burden families. For example, CSC uses ion scanners and requires drug scanning of all immediate family members of prisoners; prison staff, however, are not required to undergo these scans.¹⁸ Women describe this process as humiliating and

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 30.

¹⁷ Hannem, "Stigma and Marginality," 190.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

traumatic, and many women are deterred from visiting their children out of fear that they will scan positive in the ion scanner and will be banned from future visits altogether.

Another major concern facing mothers of prisoners that goes largely unrecognized is the financial burden of having an incarcerated child. The obvious termination of the prisoner's salary caused by their incarceration has potentially grave consequences for families, especially parents who were relying on their children for financial support in their retirement or parents of single parents who are then forced to support their grandchildren. Parents are also expected to cover costs for a growing list of necessary items at the prison commissary that have risen in price dramatically as of late, while the salary for prisoners has remained stagnant over many years.¹⁹ Additionally, collect calls from prison, lengthy and expensive travels to visit federal prisons across the country, and the potential costs of housing for a child after their release from prison are all expenses that parents are expected to take on.²⁰

Mothers also expressed that their grief was amplified by the lack of information they were able to access from CSC about the condition of their child, about how best to proceed through their child's arrest and trial, and about where to seek outside guidance. The pain caused by their child's arrest is not alleviated over time, and most women remain in distress throughout the duration of their child's sentence.²¹ Mothers are concerned for their child's safety, particularly when they are unable to easily make contact with their child for extended periods of

¹⁹ Howard Sapers, *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2015-2016*. Report. (Government of Canada, 2016).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hannem and Leonardi, *Forgotten Victims*, 20.

time.²² According to the Canadian Families and Corrections Network, this can also be attributed to systemic barriers in place by CSC: “There are obvious gaps in policy which may prevent families from being notified or provided detailed information in the event that their loved one is at risk, ill, or injured. The natural inclination to be worried about a loved one’s safety is exaggerated in the face of the very real possibility that one may not even aware in the event of an emergency.”²³ This avoidable agony placed on the families of prisoners also leads to many mothers of inmates reporting chronic health conditions caused by stress. This unnecessary hardship could be ameliorated with additional understanding and respect from the CSC.

When we acknowledge and accept that most family members of prisoners, almost 79% in fact, maintain a strong relationship with their incarcerated loved one and report feeling that this relationship is very positive,²⁴ it becomes difficult to see the purpose of the blame and stigma we, as a society, place upon the mothers of criminals. The additional suffering imposed upon women whose children commit crimes by a society that is unwilling to acknowledge their pain only serves to negatively impact their relationships with their children (and others around them). This does not make us safer as a society— in fact, it makes us less safe. Having a supportive family and maintaining positive relationships with those on the outside has been proven again and again to reduce the rate of recidivism among prisoners.²⁵ Therefore, we should be supporting and

²² Hannem and Leonardi, *Forgotten Victims*, 19.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

encouraging these mothers that continue to love and support their children in the hopes of rehabilitation and increased public safety.

It is easy to love a well-behaved child. Loving a child who has committed a heinous act requires an effort not required by most; yet, Andrew Solomon attests, “love is made more acute when it requires exertion.”²⁶ A mother’s love is powerful and unconditional. Speaking of her son, Dinny explained to me:

“He’s taken somebody’s life, and I just can’t really express the depth of my sorrow for that action [...] but I love my son, just as much as the victim’s family loved their daughter [...] Can your child do something that’s so bad that you stop loving them?... I guess that I have to come to no. But can you love your child even if they do something that you think is really wrong? I think the answer is yes.”

My aim in performing this research and sharing my findings in the form of a podcast and photography series is to help others recognize the women who, like Dinny, continue loving their children against all odds, despite the additional burdens of blame and stigma they face that are not productive or just.

Chapter 2: Methodology

i. Meeting Moms

One question that I am frequently asked when discussing this project is, “How did you meet the mothers?” Almost immediately after I decided on the topic for my project in December of 2015, I began searching for women to interview. I started by posting in online chat groups for mothers with children in prison. These were not easy to find. I came across one, *Mothers with*

²⁶ Solomon, *Far From the Tree*, 43.

Sons in Prison, and posted in a forum there.²⁷ I also found an online community on *Daily Strength* devoted to mothers of prisoners,²⁸ as well as another site called *MISS (Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society, Inc.)*.²⁹ After posting in these chat sites asking if anyone would be interested in speaking to me I heard back from only two women (it was unclear which chat group they were part of, as they just emailed me directly); one woman was in Massachusetts and stopped responding to my emails quickly once she realized I was in Canada, and one was Jackie.³⁰ Jackie lives in St. Catharines and was eager to be part of my project.

Otherwise, I had very little luck meeting mothers on chat sites. I stopped posting after only about a month. I met with Jackie first, in March of 2016, about two months after receiving her response to my post in a chat site. At our first meeting Jackie told me she had a friend she met while visiting her son in prison who might be interested in participating in my project. This is how I met Rebecca. I spoke to Rebecca for the first time on April 9, 2016 and met Rebecca for the first time on June 26, 2016.

I decided to attempt to meet mothers through some Canadian support groups, which proved to be a difficult task— as I’ve said before, there are very few resources for families of prisoners. I did find the Canadian Families and Corrections Network, an organization dedicated both to researching and supporting families of inmates in Canada. I reached out to the director, Louise Leonardi, and we met for a coffee in March of 2016. She was helpful in providing insight into

²⁷ *Mothers with Sons in Prison*. Accessed February 18, 2016. <http://www.motherswithsonsinprison.com/index.php>.

²⁸ “Moms of Prisoners Community Group,” *Daily Strength*. Accessed February 18, 2016. <https://www.dailystrength.org/group/moms-of-prisoners>.

²⁹ *Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society, Inc.* Accessed February 18, 2016. <http://www.mothersofinmates.org/>.

³⁰ See Appendix A.4.

her own experiences working with women whose children are incarcerated, highlighted for me some systemic issues families face when their loved one is arrested, and led me in the directions of sources I could use for further research.

Louise also introduced me to several women who have relied on CFCN and who were interested in participating in my project. I met with a few women who were eager to speak to me but did not want to be featured in the project, and I still valued hearing their concerns. Two women I met in this way who were interested in participating in the project were Dinny³¹ and Wendy.³² Wendy was initially nervous about being featured in my project but after speaking to me on the phone in April 2016 and meeting with me in June 2016 she changed her mind. Wendy is an active member of the Ottawa-based group Mothers Offering Mutual Support (MOMS), and she invited me to a forum event MOMS arranged called “The Cost of Human Warehousing” on June 7th, 2016. At this event I met Farhat,³³ the co-founder of MOMS.

ii. Content Research

It became clear to me early on that I would need to do quite a bit of research before interviewing the women. Because the project deals with such a sensitive subject, I was unsure how many times the mothers would let me meet with them. Therefore, I wanted to make sure I was very thorough in my initial interviews. Over the winter break of 2015/ 2016 I began with research from CFCN into how incarceration impacted families. This was very useful, and

³¹ See Appendix A.5.

³² See Appendix A.6.

³³ See Appendix A.3.

provided me with more of an understanding into issues such as the financial burden on families when a loved one is incarcerated, or the documented mental health issues facing families after their family member is arrested.

After speaking to some of the mothers in the spring of 2016, I realized that many of their concerns were actually related to the conditions their children faced while in prison— for example, the poor sleeping conditions in Ontario provincial prisons, or the damaging effects of solitary confinement. Therefore, in the spring and summer of 2016 I redirected my research to try to gain a thorough understanding of the Canadian prison system. This involved reading reports from the Office of the Correctional Investigator and attending events such as “The Cost of Human Warehousing”. In August of 2016 I also reached out to professors of criminology at Carlton University, who have been active in fighting for prison reform.

Finally, in the fall of 2016 I moved my research into the theoretical realm. I began reading about disenfranchised grief and courtesy stigma, hoping to gain more understanding into what the mothers have been through. I also used this research to help me craft my potential follow-up questions to ensure I got to the depth of the emotions these women have experienced, in the hopes of ensuring as much empathy as possible in the audience.

iii. Documentary Research

Because I came into this program from a film background, my decision to create a web-based podcast/ photography series, as well as a gallery show, was not an easy one. However, I felt this form would best disseminate the stories I was attempting to tell. Therefore I needed to conduct quite a bit of practical research in preparation of producing this project. I began by

researching photographers working in a mode similar to what I was hoping to achieve. I also listened to a variety of podcasts to understand what other producers are creating and to help me decide how I wanted to assemble my own podcast. At this time, I was planning on assembling each episode without any narration and was simply going to edit the women's voices to tell their story.

When I began production of this project (in the spring of 2016) I had very little photography experience, and needed to work significantly on improving my skills. I began by photographing portraits of my friends and my family. I also produced an entire portrait series about my grandfather in April of 2016 in preparation for working with the mothers. I had produced several audio documentaries in the past, and felt more adept with my audio recording/editing skills.

iv. Interview Preparation

It was very important to me to develop a relationship with these women that extended beyond a simple interview, as I wanted to produce a work that was as honestly reflective of each woman as possible. Therefore, I made sure to speak to all women on the phone or meet in person before we recorded the interview. This helped me understand more about their story and their personality so I could more appropriately direct the interviews and could gauge how to conduct myself to make each woman feel comfortable while speaking to me.

I wrote down a list of questions to guide each interview, but I mostly only referred to these at the beginning of the interview, or if there was a lull in the conversation. The series of questions began by asking each woman about herself and her interests, moved into discussing

what her child was like during their adolescence, and then progressed to addressing her relationship to the criminal justice system. To finish the interview, I made sure to focus on the mother's emotional experiences during the entire incarceration process. I purposely began the interview with easier questions, keeping things light. I wanted to make sure each woman knew that I wanted to get to know her as a person before asking about her son's crime. I also wanted to demonstrate that I wanted to learn about who her son was outside of his crime. I found this format was very useful in helping the women feel comfortable, trust me, and open up to me.

v. Question List

Here is a rough structure I created to help guide the interviews:

- Please introduce yourself
- Tell me about your interests, childhood, family, career, passions, etc.
- Tell me about your child before they went to prison (their birth, pregnancy, childhood, personality, interests, passions, etc.)
- What are your favourite memories with your child?
- How old was your child when they were arrested?
- Did your child's criminal behaviour come as a surprise to you?
- Please describe your experiences with the arrest, trial, sentencing, prison system, visits, etc. (prison system)
- Do you feel comfortable discussing the nature of the crime?
- Do you feel comfortable sharing the sentence?
- Please describe the day you found out about the crime/ the day of the arrest

- What dreams did you have for your child before they were arrested? What dreams do you have for your child now?
- How have the relationships in your family changed since your child was arrested?
- How has your relationship with your child changed since the arrest?
- How has the nature of the arrest/ crime impacted your relationship with your child?
- What has been the most difficult part of this whole experience?
- What supports have you had since the arrest (including support for mental health, fighting stigma, etc.)?

vi. Interviewing

To conduct the interviews, I decided to travel to each woman's home to ensure they were as comfortable as possible, especially because I was demanding so much emotional energy and vulnerability from each woman. However, this did occasionally present some difficulties in recording clean sound without any background noises. For the most part I was very lucky. However, Jackie's granddaughter sometimes interrupted by wanting to play, there were some cars driving by in the background of Rebecca's interview, and Dinny's house was full of noise from the rain and her air conditioning. Still, though, I managed to capture very usable audio during the first interview with each woman. These interviews were recorded between March 2016 and September 2016.

The women I worked with for this project were eager to share their stories, and I therefore did not have to push too hard to get them to open up during these interviews. However, some of the women did have their own agendas or were prone to going on tangents. I was careful

not to interrupt the women while they were talking because I did not want them to feel that I was uninterested or was judging them based on what they were saying. This meant that the interviews sometimes went on for several hours. Although the content was extremely heavy, and these women were discussing very traumatic things, I left most interviews feeling that the process had been cathartic for the women. The one exception was my interview with Farhat—her story was exceptionally tragic and very complex, and therefore the interview went on for around four hours. I also wanted to make sure I captured a decent number of photographs after our interview because I had already been to Ottawa for the project a number of times— this was my mistake. Farhat was clearly exhausted after being so emotionally vulnerable for so many hours, and was absolutely worn out as I followed her around taking photographs. After every other interview I felt invigorated because I felt that I was helping these women. After meeting with Farhat I felt drained and disappointed because I felt I had pushed her too hard. In the future, I will attempt to do a better job of assessing how my subject is feeling, and do my best to respect that.

vii. Photographing

When I initially envisioned this project I imagined creating environmental portraits of each woman in her home. While learning more about photography I got slightly carried away, and began to envision other ways to create portraits of the women. To prepare for this project I created a portfolio of photographs depicting my grandfather's battle with Alzheimer's. To tell this story I realized I needed to photograph the objects around him, his living space, and even his clothes. This really shaped how I went into photographing the women involved in

Unconditional. I began photographing objects in their homes related to their child's incarceration, locations related to their stories, and I also began taking action shots by following them around during a typical day. I am not convinced this was the best way to approach the photography portion of the project.

One obstacle I faced in capturing photographs was making the women feel comfortable and confident while I photographed them. I believe, unfortunately, most middle-aged women would be self-conscious about having their photograph taken, and my subjects were no exception. To overcome this, I returned multiple times to shoot additional photographs of each woman. After each visit the women became more comfortable with having their photograph taken. This was also useful because my photography skills improved greatly over the course of the year. I was shooting photographs from March 2016 all the way up until May 2017.

viii. Podcast Post-Production

While transcribing the interviews and beginning the process of story editing in the fall of 2016 I re-assessed my decision to edit the podcasts without any narration. Initially I was hesitant about including my own voice because I did not want to act as the "voice-of-God". It has been very important to me throughout the process of creating this project that I allow the mothers to hold authority over their own stories. These women have had many traumatic experiences with the media and have grown accustomed to being silenced or being spoken for.

However, after spending more time with the material and getting advice from peers and supervisors, I decided that the podcasts required some narration to help with structure and to break up the monotony of listening to a single voice. I also wanted to be able to provide factual

and statistical information to give context to the mothers' stories, and to clarify portions of the story that may have become unclear when editing the interviews down for length.

After transcribing each interview in November 2016, I began editing in December 2016 by listening to the interview and cutting out anything I thought was not useful to the final episode. This took me about one to two weeks per episode. I then separated the remaining material into separate tracks. After this I wrote notes on cue cards to help me identify each track, and labeled them accordingly. Then I was able to re-organize the cue cards to create a paper edit. This gave me a rough assembly for each episode and took roughly one week per episode. I sent these assemblies to multiple people, both professionals in media production and non-professionals who reflected my target audience. This was extremely useful for helping me understand what parts were unclear, unnecessary, or simply boring. This also helped me craft my narration and was vital in deciding where my voice would be useful in breaking up the monotony of a single voice. I wrote the narration as I was story editing, recorded an initial attempt of the narration in one day, and dropped the narration into the episodes the next day. I then sent the newly edited episodes to several people who had not yet listened to the rough assemblies and asked them to assess for clarity. Then I re-recorded portions of the narration where I spoke too quickly or needed to clarify something. Once this was completed, I mixed the sound, cleaned up the audio, and added the soundtrack. This process took anywhere from one day to two weeks, depending on the quality of the audio from the interviews. Because I had recorded the interviews at a relatively low level, I was disappointed in the amount of noise in several of the episodes once I raised the volume. To remedy this, I tried paying professionals to master the sound of both Dinny's and Jackie's episodes. In the end, though, I was not satisfied with their work and ended

up re-mastering each episode myself. As the deadline for the release of the podcast approached, there was one weekend in which I spent over 20 hours straight mastering audio. I chose my music from the library of Podington Bear (AKA Chad Crouch). The introduction and credit music are the same in every episode. I also chose to use the same few songs across all episodes, to remain consistent and maintain the tone across the series. Because the content of the interviews is already quite tragic, I wanted to ensure that the soundtrack was not too melodramatic. I did not want to fetishize the women's pain, or simplify the women into victims. At the same time, it was important to me that the music reflected the seriousness of the content.

ix. Photographs Post-Production

While editing my photos I realized that I had gotten off track when taking the portraits of the mothers. I had been so eager to tell a story with the photographs that I lost track of the goal I had for my work. I decided to limit the portraits on the wall of the installation to one environmental portrait of each woman, printed in large size. These portraits also serve as the seminal portraits of each woman on the website, and are the first images the audience sees when directed to the online content. I decided that close-ups, action shots, and photographs of locations or objects would be reserved for a photo gallery on each episode's page on the website.

x. Installation and Website

Going into this project I initially envisioned the gallery being very small and very minimal. I imagined that I would have several photographs from each woman hanging on the wall, with an accompanying text caption providing some context. In the beginning I was very

opposed to bringing audio into the gallery—I wanted to advertise the website in the gallery and encourage viewers to listen to the podcast in their own time. However, after presenting some of my audio content to my peers and advisors in December of 2016, I was encouraged to bring at least some of the audio into the gallery. The compromise I felt comfortable with included using headphones to maintain the intimacy between viewers and the subjects. At first I imagined having possibly two sets of headphones in the gallery connected to a tablet where viewers could select whose story to listen to. After much discussion, I decided it would be best to have a set of headphones in front of each woman’s portrait so that viewers were encouraged to look at the woman while hearing her speak, creating a conversation and an intimacy between audience and subject.³⁴

Choosing the audio to include in the gallery was not an easy challenge. I needed to pick a clip that provided enough context to make it clear that the woman’s child was in prison, but that was short enough that the audience would not grow bored standing in a gallery and listening to it. I also did not want to give away too much information in the audio clips, but wanted to tease out what made each story unique, enticing the listener to go online and download the entire podcast series. By the time I was choosing these short audio clips, I already had a fairly decent idea of what I had available to work with from each woman’s interview, and had already identified the more viscerally emotional sections. I picked these portions of the interview out, then provided enough context to ensure that the audience would understand what they were listening to and would empathize with the mother. I selected these clips and edited them together in early May of 2017. Because the audio clips in the gallery are relatively short, I decided they could be playing

³⁴ See Appendix B.1.

on a loop, and therefore could easily play on iPods. I was able to borrow enough iPods from friends and families and build small containers for the iPods to hide them and protect them from theft, and also to serve as a holder for the headphones.

When it came time to consider galleries for my show, one of my peers, Eliot Wright, told me that he had envisioned my work in a gallery that alludes to a domestic space, potentially with a couch or a fireplace. I agreed, and decided I wanted to bring a couch and coffee table into the gallery. The Ryerson Art Space at the Gladstone has hardwood floors and an exposed brick wall, which I felt could make reference to a living room, and this influenced my decisions to use this space to show my work. I decided to place a couch against the back wall and bring in a small coffee table to create a sitting area.³⁵ On the table I placed small promotional cards with QR codes directing to the project's website.³⁶ There was also a tablet with headphones that was locked on the website sitting on the table so the audience was given ample encouragement to investigate the online portion of the project.³⁷

I printed the photographs quite large— 24 x 18 inches — and they were framed without a mat to allude further to the living room theme, and also to help maintain a balance between the aesthetic and the didactic purposes of the work.³⁸ I chose a quote by each woman that would intrigue a viewer and encourage them to pick up the headphones to listen to the woman's story. This was difficult, as I wanted the quote to be provocative, but did not want to reveal too much

³⁵ See Appendix B.2.

³⁶ See Appendix B.3.

³⁷ See Appendix B.4.

³⁸ See Appendix B.5.

about the story before the audience listened to the audio. I printed these quotes quite large (38pt) on black vinyl, and mounted them as captions next to each photo, directly above the headphones.³⁹

The quotes were:

- Yvonne: “I was worried, at 77, that I would never see my son again. I figured I would be going to my grave and not see him no more.”
- Jackie: “It seemed he would disappear inside himself. I just put it down to; 19-years-old, baby, no job, living with your parents. I didn’t realize there was other things happening up there. I had no idea.”
- Rebecca: “When you were younger I could always stand in front of you and protect you. I may not be able to protect you anymore because you’re an adult, but I’m not going anywhere.”
- Dinny: “The depth of the sorrow you feel when your child has done something very wrong — I mean, it’s not a little thing, it’s not like he’s taken someone’s pail in the sandbox.”
- Wendy: “He had the perfect life. I thought everything was perfect. How could he do this?”
- Farhat: “It’s like a dream— it’s like a nightmare. It was behind glass, he came in that orange suit...”

In the gallery, I sequenced the photos based both on the woman’s story and on the aesthetic quality of the photographs. I placed the photo of my grandmother closest to the door, as she was leaning into the gallery in the photo, inviting the audience to further investigate the

³⁹ See Appendix B.6.

show.⁴⁰ Her story also inspired the entire project, and I thought it would be fitting that hers would be the first that audiences interacted with. Next to my grandmother's photo was Jackie. She was staring straight ahead in the photo,⁴¹ and across from her was the portrait of Wendy, who is also staring straight ahead, back at her.⁴² Next to Jackie's photo was Rebecca's, who was looking out the window in her photograph, which translated to her looking out the door in the gallery.⁴³ Dinny's photograph was hanging closest to the back wall, directly opposite Rebecca. Dinny is looking outward, toward the couch, directly confronting the audience in the sitting area while they engage with the digital tablet.⁴⁴ Next to Dinny was Wendy, who again, was looking directly across at Jackie.⁴⁵ Finally, Farhat was placed at the "end" of the show, looking outwards towards the window of the gallery.⁴⁶ Farhat's quote was the only one that revealed her son is in prison. This was intentional— the audience engaged with all of the other photographs and quotes before reading that Farhat's son is in prison, and were then (hopefully) inspired to go back and re-evaluate the rest of the photographs in the gallery. The artist's statement was placed at the end of the show, again encouraging the audience to make judgments about the women in the photographs prior to knowing that their children are incarcerated. Then, after reading the artist statement, the viewer will be forced to re-assess their impressions of the women.

⁴⁰ See Appendix B.7.

⁴¹ See Appendix B.8.

⁴² See Appendix B.9.

⁴³ See Appendix B.10.

⁴⁴ See Appendix B.11.

⁴⁵ See Appendix B.9.

⁴⁶ See Appendix B.5.

I created a website⁴⁷ using a podcasting plugin for WordPress. On the homepage, I included the seminal portrait of each woman, along with the title of the episode and the quote that was included in the gallery. When the picture or the title is clicked, the page is redirected to a unique page dedicated to each episode. This page includes the Play button for the podcast episode, and a gallery of additional photographs with captions providing context and more information about each woman's story. The episodes were also made available on iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Play, which made them available for people to download and subscribe.

I ordered the episodes as follows:

1. Introduction/ Yvonne
2. Dinny
3. Rebecca
4. Jackie
5. Wendy
6. Farhat

The first episode is a brief introduction to the project, which includes an explanation of how I became interested in the topic and why I felt it was important. I also included an interview with my grandmother, who inspired the project, and some background about my personal experience with incarceration. The first full episode of *Unconditional* documents Dinny's story. I chose to place Dinny's episode at the beginning because I felt it was one of the most compelling and I hoped it would encourage listeners to explore other episodes. She is highly intellectual and discusses a number of philosophical issues related to incarceration that I was interested in

⁴⁷ See *Unconditional Podcast*, June 1, 2017, www.unconditionalpodcast.com.

examining. I also felt that she comes across as a very sympathetic character and is highly relatable to most listeners, which I hoped would set the tone for the rest of the episodes. I chose to make Rebecca's story second because her story is quite emotional, which balances out Dinny's levelheaded interview. Jackie's story came next because she spends quite a long time discussing systemic issues with the Canadian prison system, which is important content but is less emotionally or philosophically compelling. This segues well into Wendy's episode, because she discusses extensively problems with the Canadian prison system. Her story is also towards the end because it has a happy ending. I decided to make Farhat's story the last episode. Her story is quite complex, and requires devoted attention from the audience, but it is also one of the most tragic stories. Farhat has had quite a lot of time to sort through her emotions and distance herself from the trauma of her son's crime. Therefore, her interview is quite reflective and Farhat is able to be very introspective. I decided that this was the right tone to end the podcast series.

Chapter 3: Documentary Relevance

My decision to create a web-based documentary project involving both a podcast series and a photography series has been continually questioned throughout my creative process, both by industry professionals and by family and friends. I have decided to address the decision to produce a podcast series and the decision to produce a photography series separately, followed by a broader analysis addressing additional theoretical concerns raised by my project.

i. On Podcasting

It was important to me in creating this project that women whose children are incarcerated were provided a sufficient platform to share their stories that have so often been ignored and overlooked. The practice of recording interviews with women whose voices have not historically been given weight falls under the feminist tradition of oral history. The article “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History” explains, “Oral history is a basic tool in our efforts to incorporate the previously overlooked lives, activities, and feelings of women into our understanding of the past and of the present. When women speak for themselves, they reveal hidden realities: new experiences and new perspectives emerge that challenge the ‘truths’ of official accounts and cast doubts upon established theories.”⁴⁸ One of my goals in pursuing this project has been to challenge assumptions about what “type” of women mother criminals, and this challenging of assumptions about women’s experiences falls exactly into line with the historical goals of feminists in practicing oral history.⁴⁹ Joan Sangster writes, “The feminist embrace of oral history emerged from a recognition that traditional sources have often neglected the lives of women, and that oral history offered a means of integrating women into historical scholarship, even contesting the reigning definitions of social, economic and political importance that obscured women’s lives.”⁵⁰ The women I worked with in creating this project have traditionally been ignored, misrepresented, and misunderstood by society. They have been misquoted in newspaper stories; unflattering photographs of them have been shared on social

⁴⁸ Kathryn Anderson et al., “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 104.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰ Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *Women’s History Review* 3, no. 1 (1999): 5.

media; they have been told by corrections officers and lawyers that they are not to speak or share their stories; they have been silenced by friends and families who are uncomfortable with their situation. In recording thorough and empathetic interviews with these women about their lived experiences, I have used the feminist practice of oral history to reconstruct these narratives. To empower women, we must challenge preconceived notions about their experiences and feelings by asking them to tell their stories and providing a platform for these stories to be heard.

Traditionally, feminists have utilized the radio to disseminate oral histories and ensure women's stories are heard beyond academic spheres.⁵¹ Siobhan McHugh writes, "As a medium of dissemination for oral history, radio has not one but two main benefits: the capacity to convey the oral/ aural nature of oral history and the ability to reach a potentially much wider audience than the rather self-selecting field of, for example, readers of books or visitors to museums. The latter aspect is vitally important: you don't need to be literate to absorb oral history on the radio, thus democratizing ideals of the discipline."⁵² Though other forms of media (i.e. film) would avoid the issue of inaccessibility due to illiteracy, the importance of creating a project that exists on the Internet and that is democratically accessible to a broad audience outside of the scholarly world was very important to me in creating my major research project. McHugh goes on to write, "Nor do you need to enjoy abundant leisure time since listening can be a secondary rather than a dedicated activity."⁵³ The passivity of attending to a podcast is the form's greatest strength.

Contemporary audiences can easily access my work on their smartphones, and rather than

⁵¹ Siobhan McHugh, "The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio," *Oral History Review* 39, no. 2 (2012): 187.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

compete to maintain my audience's full attention, my project allows listeners to multitask. This makes the project more accessible and encourages audiences to engage with the stories being told.

The episodic nature of the podcast form makes it additionally accessible to audiences. Rather than engage with a feature-length film, listeners have the ability to easily take a break between episodes and return to the project in their own time. Because the project is accessed from their own personal devices, listeners can even pause episodes and return to them at their leisure. This has allowed me to include much more content in this project than otherwise would have been practical. Each episode in *Unconditional* tells a different individual woman's story. Because the project only demands half of the audience's attention, and the audience can easily take a break between episodes, I am able to provide each woman with the time they deserve to fully share their story in depth. It is important to me, in practicing oral history, that each woman's story is done justice and that their voices are heard by as many people as possible.

The stories shared by the women I worked with for this project are emotional, tragic, and personal. To encourage understanding and empathy in the audience, I felt it was important to create an intimacy between the subject and the audience. Engaging with podcasts is generally a solo activity— audiences listen while they are driving, or doing the laundry, or riding the train. Viewing a film, on the other hand, is traditionally a social experience— audiences go to a theatre or watch with loved ones on their couches. Listeners engaging independently with my project from their computer or smartphone will develop an intimate relationship with the subject that would be impossible to achieve in a theatre full of other audience members.⁵⁴ Furthermore, many

⁵⁴ Charles Stankieveh, "Headphones, Epoche, and L'extimité: A Phenomology of Interiority," *Offscreen* 11, no. 8-9 (2007): 7.

audience members engaging with podcasts listen using headphones, which creates an even more intimate experience achieved through ‘in-head’ acoustics, creating an interiority that brings listeners as close as possible to subjects.⁵⁵ Additionally, the experience of sitting in a theatre full of other audience members and watching a film of these women sharing their stories strikes me as voyeuristic and exploitative. The act of listening to the stories while alone creates a relationship between the audience and the subject, and encourages contemplation and empathy from the listener. McHugh writes,

“An affecting testimony will arouse strong feelings in the listener, which will, in turn, influence how the listener processes the story and evaluates its meaning (cognition). Put simply, the affective power of sound and voice, combined with the intimacy of the listening process, means we can be moved by listening to oral history; this, in turn, affects how we absorb and retain its content, as well as how we judge that content.”⁵⁶

The affective power of the voice, amplified by the intimate experience of listening to the stories alone, creates the emotional and respectful experience I aimed to achieve in disseminating these oral histories and encourages the audience to alter their cognition about, and compassion towards, women whose children are incarcerated.

Podcast documentaries are on the cusp of major expansion. Radio documentaries have existed for decades, but recently there has been a breakthrough of the radio documentary into mainstream consciousness. An example of this can be seen with the podcast series *Serial*⁵⁷—episodes from the two seasons of the show have been downloaded more than 250 million times.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ McHugh, “The Affective Power of Sound,” 195.

⁵⁷ Sara Koenig, *Serial Podcast*, October 3, 2014, <https://serialpodcast.org/>.

⁵⁸ Todd Spangler, “The ‘Serial’ Team’s New Podcast, ‘S-Town,’ Tops 10 Million Downloads in Four Days,” *Variety*, March 31, 2017, <http://variety.com/2017/digital/news/s-town-podcast-10-million-downloads-serial-productions-1202020302/>.

Each season of *Serial* tells the story of one crime and seeks to find answers as to what exactly happened using interviews with victims, victims' friends and family, experts and lawyers, but especially with the accused and the accused's family and friends. This project raised an interest in me to pay more attention to the experiences of those in prison, and made clear to me that documentary projects have historically shied away from the stories of criminals. *Serial* also provided me with a clear example of how to address the experiences and interests of someone who has committed a crime, while simultaneously being considerate and empathetic towards the feelings of the victim and the victim's family.

I was inspired to produce *Unconditional* in a similar style to the podcast *Criminal*.⁵⁹ Each episode of *Criminal* focuses on a different crime, sometimes from the perspective of the perpetrator, sometimes from the perspective of law enforcement, sometimes from the perspective of the victim. In fact, *Episode 58: Walnut Grove* heavily features an interview with the father of a criminal, closely related to my work on *Unconditional*. Like *Criminal*, I attempted to combine recordings from interviews with my own narration used to provide context. I also began each episode with audio of the mother revealing a portion of their story, then used narration to introduce myself, the podcast, and the woman. This is a technique *Criminal* also uses to attract the interest of the audience, and I decided it was a powerful technique to capture and maintain the listeners' attention.

⁵⁹ Phoebe Judge and Lauren Spohrer, *Criminal Podcast*, January 29, 2014, <http://thisiscriminal.com/>.

ii. On Photography

In the fall of 2015 I had the opportunity to attend the World Press Photo exhibit at Brookfield Place in Toronto. One of the projects that stood out to me was *Miracle Village*⁶⁰ by Sofia Valiente. When I first engaged with the project I simply looked at the images and assumed the project was documenting an impoverished community in the United States. However, I then went on to read the captions on the photographs, and realized the project was actually documenting a community in Florida dedicated to housing sex offenders. Armed with this new knowledge, I found myself reevaluating the photographs and searching for clues to the experiences of the subjects— suddenly a middle-aged man with his cat looked lonely and perverse; an ankle bracelet worn by an old man sitting by his bed was all at once impossible to miss; a woman (the only woman featured in the project) sitting outside her home became tragic. After thoroughly reexamining the images I began to question my changed perception of the people depicted in Valiente's photographs. Her project humanizes the sex offenders that have been forced into a quarantined existence due to the harsh restrictions placed upon their movement after their release, by showing them performing their daily tasks, depicting a broad range of emotions, and emphasizing their attempts at normalcy despite their limited resources—and yet, after learning that the subjects were sex offenders I began attempting to reduce and define them by this one facet of their identity.

This experience with *Miracle Village* inspired me to encourage a similar response in audiences when confronted with subjects who have been defined by one aspect of their identity, rather than seen as complex individuals. The women I have worked with in creating this project

⁶⁰ Valiente, Sofia, 2014, *Miracle Village*, Miracle Village, Florida.

have similarly been defined by their relationship to the criminal justice system. I wanted to ensure that viewers saw them first without this knowledge— simply as mothers, grandmothers, personal trainers, social workers, hockey fans, activists, teachers— and importantly— as women. By providing information about their attachment to the criminal justice system in captions beside the photographs and audio clips playing through the provided headphones, I encourage audiences to question and reassess their interaction with the portraits of these women before and after learning about their criminal children. I have found the desire to impose our assumptions about the experiences of women with children in prison is extremely pervasive— my own mother (already possessing the knowledge that all of the women I have worked with have children in prison) commented after seeing the portraits that one woman in particular “looked angry,” and that all the women “looked so tired”. These are adjectives others have not used to describe the women before learning of their experiences with the criminal justice system. This is the reason I have chosen to include portraits of the mothers in their homes, rather than in locations typically associated with the prison system. I have also chosen a minimal title that does not provide much information about the content of the project. When entering the gallery or opening the webpage, viewers assumedly view the photographs first, as they are large and colourful. Viewers are left unsure as to the significance of the portraits, and are then encouraged to read the accompanying text. This alters the way they interact with the photographs, and in turn, forces them to confront their own assumptions about women whose children are incarcerated by analyzing their responses before and after being given this knowledge.

The interaction I experienced with Valiente’s *Miracle Village*, and the interactions I am encouraging with my own project, raise questions about the nature of photography. Specifically,

my project calls into question positivist assumptions about photography as a medium. John Berger discusses this in the article “Appearances (selections on Positivism)”. He explains, “Positivism and the camera and sociology grew up together. What sustained them all as practices was the belief that observable quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that he would be able to order them both.”⁶¹ My project compels viewers to question how their interpretations of photographs change depending on their given contexts, therefore revolting against previously established assumptions about the objectivity of photographs.

In her project *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*⁶², Martha Rosler photographed beer bottles rather than the people living on the Bowery because, “the artist ‘refused’ to picture those ‘twice victimized: first by society, and then by the photographer who presumes the right to speak on their behalf.’”⁶³ This view of photography as a violent act is reflected in the writing of Susan Sontag. She argues that the photograph performs an act of violence upon its subjects by reducing them down to one specific moment in time.⁶⁴ I agree with this analysis of photography’s inability to represent people in their full complexity, but I have chosen to use the reductive power of photography to the benefit of my subjects. I have photographed each woman in her home, using natural and warm lighting to make her appear dignified, tender, and motherly. None of the women have been photographed in settings or with

⁶¹ John Berger, “Appearances (selections on Positivism)”, in *Another way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books), 99.

⁶² Rosler, Martha. *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*. Photographs. 1974- 1975.

⁶³ Steve Edwards, “Inadequate Descriptions”, in *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (London: Afterall Books), 7.

⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, “On Photography”, *Macmillan* (April 2011) 4.

objects that directly symbolize or indicate to an audience their connection to the criminal justice system. The images of the women directly contrast with their associated captions or audio pieces. This forces the audience to view the women as complex, and to question the ability of the photograph to capture the complexities that are inherent in all of us.

Conclusion

Going into this project, I believed that I was approaching my subjects with an open mind and free of prejudice. After all, my own grandmother is the mother of a prisoner. However, after meeting all of the women I have worked with on this project, I found myself re-assessing my own judgements. I was surprised to find that the women I met were kind, compassionate, warm, hard-working, and educated. They also all cared desperately for their children. I did not expect that the women I met would be to blame for their child's outcome, but I believe that I did expect to pity, and maybe even fear the women, rather than truly relate to and empathize with them. In some cases, I even found myself admiring the mothers. My feelings towards the women surprised me, and I then was surprised by my own surprise.

One of the most common questions I have been asked after completing this project is, "What similarities have you found between all of these women?". All six women shared very similar feelings and experiences— they all dealt with feelings of shame and grief and confusion, and all struggled to navigate a complicated legal system. The women were all continually worried about their child's condition in prison, and all worked incredibly hard to maintain their relationship with their child. However, this is where the similarities between the women end. The mothers were all very different— they had different interests, different upbringings, different

passions and beliefs. Perhaps part of me believed that I would discover some common trait between the women that could explain their child's erroneous behaviour — but this was not at all the case. In fact, in many of the stories, it seemed to me that the women had done everything within their power to help their child. This project has pushed me to further question my judgments and prejudices towards those around me who have faced the most unimaginable and extreme circumstances.

I invited all of the women involved in this project to attend the opening reception of the exhibition at the gallery on the 3rd of June, 2017. Four out of six of the women were able to attend. As soon as I saw Dinny walk in, I ran over to say hello to her and introduced her to my mother, who was eager to meet her. My mother told Dinny that she felt her story was incredibly compelling, and she thought that Dinny was an exceptionally empathetic, self-reflective, and kind person. Up until this point, Dinny had not said much since arriving. She leaned into my mother, and quietly said, “That means so much to me. I was so nervous about coming today. I thought to myself, ‘Oh God, Dinny, what have you done?’ A lot of people have told me that I am not nice. I’ve had people call me and tell me that I’m evil. I’ve been followed home and yelled at. So that really means a lot to me to hear that you think I’m nice.” Dinny was one of the last people to leave the gallery that day. She walked out the door laughing, blew me a kiss, and said, “See you soon! Ciao!”

In the past, these women have been in very few public spaces where those around them were aware of their child's incarceration. These spaces include the courtroom and the prison visitor's room. These are spaces where the women have been largely harassed and scorned. I believe it was a hugely positive experience for each of these women to be in a public space

where everyone around them knew the story of their son and yet still treated them with respect and kindness. I am grateful to have been able to provide this experience to these mothers.

While they certainly have not been heard loudly or often enough, the stories of prisoners are being shared more and more frequently. With documentaries such as *Making a Murderer* or *Serial*, it seems that as a society we are moving towards an interest in showing empathy for people who have committed crimes. However, my project demonstrates that there is still a lack of interest in the experiences of the families of these criminals. My hope is that by demonstrating how our current criminal justice system is causing harm to the innocent families of those incarcerated, there will be additional incentive to reconsider whether the system we currently have encourages rehabilitation or exacerbates pain and suffering through society.

Unconditional can be found online at www.unconditionalpodcast.com.

Word Count: 10,382

Appendices

Appendix A: Project Subjects

1. Yvonne

Lives in: Tazewell, Virginia

Son in prison for: Drug possession with intent to distribute

Arrest: 2014

Sentence: Awaiting trial

2: Rebecca

Lives in: St. Catharines, Ontario

Son in prison for: Second-degree murder

Arrest: 2012

Sentence: Life with no chance of parole for 12 years

3. Farhat

Lives in: Ottawa, Ontario

Son arrested for: First-degree murder

Arrested: 2001

Sentence: Life with no chance of parole for 15 years

4: Jackie

Lives in: St. Catharines, Ontario

Son in prison for: Attempted murder

Arrest: 2013

Sentence: 13 years (plus 10 more years of probation due to long-term offender status)

5: Dinny

Lives in: Toronto, Ontario

Son in prison for: First-degree murder

Arrest: 2011

Sentence: Life with no chance of parole for 25 years

6: Wendy

Lives in: Ottawa, Ontario

Son in prison for: Attempted murder

Arrest: 2004

Sentence: 13 years

Appendix B: Installation

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2.

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10.

11.

Transcripts of Gallery Audio

Yvonne: “Whatever he does, he’s my son. I don’t take no blame for him. But I do want Rick to do better for himself. I want Rick to be happy with who he is. I want him to look in the mirror and say, ‘I’ve done okay’. But, for me, I don’t think I could change Rick. I really don’t think I could change Rick, I don’t even try and change Rick anymore. I wouldn’t know how. All families has problems. Wealthy families, poor families that don’t have anything, people that have too much, people love too much, people don’t love enough— it has no feelings for any of them. It has none. It can happen to anybody— a church-going person, or a person that don’t believe in God. Drugs can happen. It happens to anybody. I’m no different from anybody else.”

Jackie: “When you look at Lyla and the things that he could do with Lyla, and you watch her growing up, and all the things that he’s missing because he’s not there— she started hockey this year. Peter was a referee, great at hockey. He should be out there with her— and he would have been. He would have been out there every step of the way, teaching her how to skate, teaching her the rules of the game, being the dad volunteer out there. He would have done that. When I see other dads out there and they’ve got their daughter’s hand or they’re carrying their daughter, I think, ‘That’s what he’s missing’. By the time he gets out of prison, she’ll already have been established as a person. She’ll have her personality, she’ll know what she likes to do and what she doesn’t like to do, and he won’t have been a part of that. What Peter did was very wrong. He committed a crime. There is a girl out there, and I don’t care what her profession was, there is a girl out there who, when she hears footsteps behind her, thinks it’s Peter. She’s never going to be the same again. She has nightmares and my kid is her nightmare. So I’m not ever diminishing what Peter did. But at the same time, you watch those things on TV when something happens, and instead of thinking, ‘Oh my God, they should fry that guy,’ right? I know sit there and say, ‘What happened to make him do that?’”

Rebecca: “That one—one day goes over in my mind a lot of times. I try to not re-run it in my mind nearly as much as I used to. But, you know, sometimes it still comes up, and it’s always clear as a bell. Like, it’s not faded. We went out that morning, I would take him to work, and immediately I knew something was wrong because there were four undercover police cars across the street. Then we drove out of the driveway and all the cars followed us, and I said, ‘Well, I’m not really feeling comfortable, like, they’re all behind us’. Then finally they turned their sirens on and pulled us over. And I didn’t know what was happening, they just asked our name and asked him to get out of the car and cuffed him and put him into the cruiser and I was upset and asking what was happening. They wouldn’t tell me anything. ‘Your son’s an adult, ma’am. We can’t give you that information. It’s confidential.’ Um, you know, I didn’t get to give him a hug in, I think probably over two years— yeah, two and a half years. I used to think, ‘Oh, I wish I would’ve been able to give him a hug that morning.’ But um, they came and spoke the warrant and read the charges and... I was sitting down at my desk, thank goodness, ‘cause I probably would have fell down, ‘cause I just started yelling, ‘No! No! No!’ This is just somebody else’s life, somebody else’s nightmare. This doesn’t happen to us. This is just— this is crazy! This isn’t happening.”

Dinny: “As a parent, you just continue to love your kid and want the best for your kid, or some kind of life for your kid. And it’s certainly not the life for either one of my children that I had envisioned for them when I was pregnant. Both a major mental illness and losing a son to the prison system— they’re both losses. And they’re both losses of— what is your understanding of what your child is like? I felt one child I thought I knew, and then he was gone to mental illness. And Brian I thought I knew, and then suddenly there’s this thing that changes him into somebody that I don’t know at all. But what I keep coming back to is— you know, you could say, can your child do something that’s so bad that you stop loving them? And I guess I have to come to— uh — to no.”

Wendy: “I remember that call after midnight on a cold November 29th. He was at the Don Jail. He had suffered two breaks to his neck. He spent the first night at the hospital with guards, and before he had a chance to see a doctor he was taken to the Don Jail. This is not the new Don Jail, this is the old one, which was in pretty rough shape. They had him in the hospital unit in the Don Jail for a day or two, and then they put him in the general population because they were overcrowded and they had three people sleeping in a room, so Michael was sleeping on the floor. And they wouldn’t give him an extra pillow for his neck, they wouldn’t give him an extra blanket, and in the Don Jail— this was winter time— the heating system isn’t working well, so there’s frost on the floors, there’s frost on the toilet, and he’s sleeping literally almost beside the toilet, so he said, you know, when anybody got up to go, it splashes all over, so it was just totally disgusting. He did something wrong, and he should go behind bars. The problem is behind bars shouldn’t be as bad as it is. They’re still human beings, and we’re not treating them in a humane manner.”

Farhat: “I was at work, and he had called me, and I didn’t answer the phone. I was very busy at work and I ignored all the phone calls. But that was the call. He was on his way to do this act, and he had called me. And he told me that after, he told me that in prison when I had gone to visit him, he had said, ‘I called you. I called you, and had you answered, maybe you could have said something that would have jolted me into realization of what I was doing, and I would have not gone.’ When he told me that there was just a cold hand grabbed my hand and I just got drawn into that guilt with him. That has not left me, that feeling, no matter how much I say, ‘Okay, you know, I was busy.’ I had no way of knowing it was him! You know, it could have been anybody! But someday I feel totally implicated. And someday I hate the thought that he said that to me. Very, very difficult realization that something could have been done, and to live with that. To think that I could have done something.

Annotated Bibliography

Anderson, Kathryn, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner. "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 15, no.1 (Spring 1987): 103-127.

This article describes the feminist roots and methodology of oral history. Though it was written almost 30 years ago, the article provides historical context into the importance of oral history, as well as the goals of feminists in producing oral histories. It also goes into detail about the authors' opinions on proper oral history practice to receive the most useful results from interview subjects. This article also describes the power of woman's voice to impact a listener and inspire change.

Berger, John. "Appearances (selections of Positivism)." In *Another Way of Telling*, edited by John Berger and Jean Mohr, 99-100. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.

Caplan, Paula J. "Mother-Blaming." In *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-century America*, edited by Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, 127-145. New York, 1998: NYU Press.

Caplan investigates the specific phenomenon of mother blaming, which is experienced by women in both social and systemic ways. This article looks specifically at literature surrounding the health and behaviour of children, and critically analyzes the language used to implicate the mothers of children who experience negative outcomes. Caplan condemns the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of women whose children misbehave or are unhealthy. She compares the way mothers are discussed to the representation of fathers in the literature she

analyzes, and comes to the conclusion that mothers are disproportionately blamed by the experiences or behaviour of their children. This article clarifies my decision to look specifically at the experiences of mothers whose children are incarcerated, and to not interview the fathers of prisoners.

Doka, Kenneth J. "Disenfranchised Grief." *Bereavement Care* 18, no. 3 (1999): 37-39.

In this article Doka defines the concept of disenfranchised grief, which is an essential concept I investigate in my major research project. According to Doka disenfranchised grief occurs when one experiences grief that is not socially accepted or recognized, increasing the emotional burden on the grieving person. The women I have worked with for my project experience grief after their sons have been incarcerated, though their children are still alive. This grief is not socially accepted, and the women lack additional support because many do not understand the experience of losing a child who has committed a crime. Mothers also grieve the child they thought they knew, as they are now forced to acknowledge that their child is not the person they once were or they seemed to be. Doka briefly touches on grief experienced after a loved one is incarcerated; however his paper largely focuses on the broad concept of disenfranchised grief and the importance of creating space for those experiencing the phenomenon.

Edwards, Steve. "Inadequate Descriptions." In *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 6-19. London: Afterall Books, 2012.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Although it was written over 50 years ago, Goffman's theory of courtesy stigma is essential to investigating the phenomenon of stigma experienced by the women I have worked with for my major research project. Goffman explains how stigma can be transmitted from a directly stigmatized person (such as someone who commits a crime) to the people they have been associated with (especially their mothers).

Goffman explains that the closer the relationship is between the stigmatized person and the person they are associated with, the more stigma that will be transmitted.

Few relationships are as intimate as the relationship between a mother and her child, and therefore mothers are particularly susceptible to courtesy stigma.

Hannem, Stacey, and Louise Leonardi. *Forgotten Victims: The Mental Health and Well-Being of Families Affected by Crime and Incarceration in Canada*. Report. Criminology, Wildred Laurier University. Kingston, ON: Canadian Families and Corrections Network, 2015.

This report created by the Canadian Families and Corrections Network provides statistical data outlining the specific impact incarceration has on the family members of prisoners. Unfortunately, this report is unique in that very little research has been conducted into the mental health and well-being of families of prisoners. The data comes from a relatively small and self-selecting subject pool, but the research does focus on families' experiences with the Canadian prison system. The report also provides allegorical research provided by family members through phone surveys, and outlines recommendations as to how to systemically avoid the negative impact incarceration has on the mental health and well-being of families impacted by incarceration.

Hannem, Stacey. "Stigma and Marginality: Gendered Experiences of Families of Male Prisoners in Canada." In *Critical Criminology in Canada: New Voices, New Directions*, edited by Aaron Doyle and Dawn Moore, 187-217. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.

In this section of Doyle and Moore's book, Hannem looks critically at the gendered experiences of female family members affected by incarceration. She investigates systemic problems that directly affect female family members of prisoners, such as financial burdens or expectations for childcare. She also looks at the well-being of female family members, and theorizes about the potential causes of their exceptionally negative responses to the incarceration of a loved one. Very little research has been conducted into the well-being of the families of prisoners, and even less research has gone into the specifically gendered experiences of women whose family members are criminals, making this an essential source for my project. Additionally, this research is specifically Canadian and focuses on experiences of Canadian families dealing with the federal prison system.

Judge, Phoebe and Lauren Spohrer. *Criminal Podcast*. January 29, 2014. <http://thisiscriminal.com/>

Koenig, Sara. *Serial Podcast*. October 3, 2014. <https://serialpodcast.org/>

McHugh, Siobhan. "The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio." *Oral History Review* 39, no. 2 (2012): 187-206.

McHugh first establishes the important feminist history of oral history, and then describes how oral histories can be effectively disseminated using the radio. She discusses the importance of accessibility, and the necessity of reach a broad and

varied audience with oral histories to inspire change desired by oral historians. While my project will be disseminated in the form of a podcast, the theories and principles McHugh presents are still relevant to explaining my decisions in creating and disseminating the oral histories of women whose children are incarcerated.

Mothers of Incarcerated Sons Society, Inc. Accessed February 18, 2016. [http://](http://www.mothersofinmates.org/)

www.mothersofinmates.org/

“Moms of Prisoners Community Group,” *Daily Strength*. Accessed February 18, 2016. [https://](https://www.dailystrength.org/group/moms-of-prisoners)

www.dailystrength.org/group/moms-of-prisoners

Mothers with Sons in Prison. Accessed February 18, 2016. [http://](http://www.motherswithsonsinprison.com/index.php)

www.motherswithsonsinprison.com/index.php

Ruddick, Sara. “Maternal Thinking.” In *Child Nurturance Volume 1: Philosophy, Children, and the Family*, edited by Albert C. Cafagna, Richard T. Peterson, and Craig A. Staudenbaur, 101-127. New York: Plenum Press, 1982.

In this article Ruddick explores the power of motherhood and the blame mothers are forced to bare from both their children and society. She theorizes that there is an imbalance between the powerful position a mother holds over their child during the child’s youth, and the powerless position women hold in a patriarchal society. In Ruddick’s opinion, this leads to the child’s frustration, and eventually the child’s blame and lack of appreciation for their mother. These theories are central to my understanding and explaining the gendered blame mothers experience when their children are incarcerated.

Rosler, Martha. *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*. Photographs. 1974- 1975.

Sangster, Joan. "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History." *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5-28.

This portion of Sangster's book focuses on the importance of using oral history for progressing the interests of feminism. It focuses on the benefit of sharing women's stories using oral history to empower them, address the systemic problems they are facing, and in turn, fix those problems.

Sapers, Howard. *Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2015-2016*. Report. Office of the Correctional Investigator, Government of Canada, 2016.

Howard Sapers's annual report highlights the problems present with the federal prison system in Canada. As the Correctional Investigator, Sapers spends each year visiting federal prisons across the country; listening to concerns from prisoners, families, and ombudsmen; and gathering and analyzing data to understand trends and issues with the federal prison system in Canada. The factual evidence of systemic problems raised by Sapers, as well as the allegorical evidence he presents from his experiences in Canadian federal institutions, is useful in contextualizing and confirming the issues raised by the mothers I have interviewed for this project. I will be using statistics and quotations from this annual report to provide context throughout my podcast episodes as well.

Solomon, Andrew. *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*. New York: Scribner, 2012.

Solomon draws from personal experience and extensive contextual research to investigate identity politics between parents and their children. He begins the novel

by differentiating between horizontal and vertical identities; vertical identities are inherited from parents, whereas horizontal identities are inherent in children and foreign to their parents. The novel is divided into chapters separated by various horizontal identities experienced by children. Solomon conducted extensive interviews with both parents and children, and documents their experiences thoroughly and honestly. The chapter that was most relevant for my project focuses on the experiences of the parents of criminals. This novel investigates the experiences of mothers of prisoners through the lens of identity politics.

Sontag, Susan. "On Photography," *Macmillan*. (April, 2011). https://books.google.ca/books?id=_IN7UtRmsQwC&printsec=frontcover&dq=susan+sontag+on+photography&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiC18OZ5KjMAhUJwj4KHcf9DW4Q6AEIGzAA#v=onepage&q&f=false. (accessed April 19, 2016).

This seminal source theorizes the power of the photograph and the practice of photographing.

Spangler, Todd. "The 'Serial' Team's New Podcast, 'S-Town,' Tops 10 Million Downloads in Four Days." *Variety*. March 31, 2017. <http://variety.com/2017/digital/news/s-town-podcast-10-million-downloads-serial-productions-1202020302/>

Stankieveh, Charles. "Headphones, Epoche, and L'extimité: A Phenomenology of Interiority." *Offscreen* 11, no. 8-9 (August/September 2007). http://offscreen.com/pdf/stankieveh_headphones.pdf.

Stankieveh theorizes the intimacy created when audiences use headphones to listen to radio. He argues that the sound is physically being transmitted into the listeners'

head and therefore creates a particular intimacy that is not present through other forms of audio dissemination.

Valiente, Sofia. 2014. *Miracle Village*, Miracle Village, Florida.