Containment and Resistance: Girls’ writing in the juvenile justice system

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Girls within the American juvenile justice system are one of the most stereotyped and marginalized populations in the country. Because of the many systemic barriers between these girls and society outside of the system, pre- and misconceptions abound about what it means to be an incarcerated girl. How can we access incarcerated girls' expressions of their experiences, perspectives and feelings on their own terms? Although there are almost no accessible media artifacts produced by youth in the system, the webzine *The Beat Within* includes girls' creative writing and serves as a site to investigate whether existing avenues for their self-expression are also subject to the juvenile justice system's management. If this is the case, institutions limit and shape the writers' expressions and the discourse surrounding their subjectivities as incarcerated girls. In this study, I analyze how elements of *The Beat Within* align with public conceptions of girlhood in the contemporary United States, particularly those described through Anita Harris' dichotomy of the can-do and at-risk girl. What larger themes and discourses of girlhood are represented in or absent from the aforementioned text, and do they reinforce stereotypes of criminal, at-risk girlhood?

*The Beat Within: A Weekly Publication of Writing and Art from the Inside* is a weekly webzine of youth submissions from writing workshops within juvenile justice facilities. Since its director and senior editor, David Inocencio, co-founded the program in San Francisco in 1996, it has grown from a six-page magazine to span eight California county systems and satellite programs in six other states. The scope of the project has also grown significantly in terms of funding, staff and youth submissions. It has over 30 grant and institutional sponsors and is run through the Pacific News Services' New American Media, a foundation that focuses on youth cultures. There are four assistant editors and dozens of staff listed in each issue's table of contents, and the hundreds of works published in each issue are selected from over 2,000 weekly submissions (Maestretti n.p.). Additionally, each published piece is accompanied by a brief editor's response, signed -The Beat-, which comments on content or form. The issues run around 60-80 pages each and are divided into geographical sections with two subsections that begin each issue: Pieces of the Week and Co-Pieces of the Week. Each cover displays a presumably youth-drawn image and some issues include occasional pieces of artwork, none of which are
attributed. Despite the limitations of considering *The Beat Within* as only a media source, the ultimate stakes of this project are high. As Sinor states, “Very few public texts document the daily experience of young women on their own terms. Representations of what it means to be a girl in today’s world are primarily disseminated by the media and movie industry” (248). This is especially true of girls in the American juvenile justice system, who are part of a growing demographic which is especially subject to physical surveillance and social control.

This study is informed by feminist criminology scholars, especially Meda Chesney-Lind, and uses Anita Harris’ theory of the can-do and at-risk girl as a framework for discussing *The Beat Within’s* representation of girlhood. Harris theorizes the can-do girl as a late-modern subject “who is flexible, individualized, resilient, self-driven, and self-made and who easily follows nonlinear trajectories to fulfillment and success” (“Future” 16). She is “optimistic” and “the most confident, resilient, and empowered of all the demographic groups affected by risk,” groups which clearly include incarcerated girls (25, 16). The can-do girl model is highly problematic in its assumption that all girls can attain its status with enough drive or the right attitude, and that they must continuously adapt and re-imagine themselves to be successful subjects. The other side of girlhood subjectivities is the at-risk girl, an embodiment of failure instead of success. Harris characterizes at-risk youth as those who are rendered vulnerable by their circumstances living in poverty, in unstable homes, in communities known for violence, drugs, crime, and so on, but in her discourse of the at-risk girl, the vulnerability is due to laziness and poor personal choices instead of structural disadvantage (Future 25). Economic class is clearly tied to personal values and social worth in this model, which aligns with the fact that, often due to systematic inequalities and bias, poor communities have disproportionately high incarceration rates.¹ Together, these discourses offer an ideal framework for considering the way delinquent girlhood is popularly imagined and managed, especially when used alongside feminist criminologist theory.

Feminist criminology theorists comprise a movement dedicated to scholarship and activism around the intersections

¹ See Bruce Western’s 2006 book, *Punishment and Inequality in America*, for an example of the extensive work done on imprisonment and inequality.
of gender and crime. Feminist criminologists theorize how women’s and girls’ pathways into crime are tied to their bodily victimization and how “criminal justice practices support patriarchal practices and worldviews” (Chesney-Lind 8, 9). The correctional system actively enforces patriarchy, along with the racial, sexual and class order, through its processing and punishment regimes, as Chesney-Lind and Eliason note (43). Women convicted of crimes have not just violated the law, but have transgressed the gender role expectations that act as powerful tools for their social and structural management. Each of these concepts is vital to drawing a picture of girls’ experiences in the juvenile justice system, and I use the work of these scholars to help situate discourses of girlhood within larger systems of marginalization and power.

The situation of girls in the American juvenile justice system is both unique and urgent. Despite an overall drop in juvenile crime, girls are the fastest-growing segment of the system’s population, increasing steadily from 19% of delinquency cases in 1991 to 26% in 2002 (Snyder and Sickmund 161). Growth in girls’ detention is not due to a significant increase in violent behavior, but instead to institutional factors, including gender bias in misdemeanor cases, changes in police practices and legal labeling of family violence, and, perhaps, a fundamental systemic failure to understand the particular social, legal and developmental issues facing contemporary girls (“Justice” 3). These insufficiently-addressed developmental concerns can include gender-specific needs in education, trauma recovery, family relationships, and parenting, and can be in regard to suicidal thinking, substance abuse, and medical needs (13). Girls are also detained differently: of juvenile delinquents from 1997 to 2003, one-third of females were detained in facilities compared to one-quarter of males, partially because females were more likely to be held for minor offenses (Snyder and Sickmund 208, 210). Gender disparities in detainment statistics are consistent with the well-documented use of detention as a means of social control of girls’ behavior considered dangerous to themselves (“Justice” 19). Feminist criminology asserts that even if girls’ behavior may be dangerous, the disparities in their detainment data compared to dangerous boys is not only behavior but gender-based, and must be addressed by structural change to the system. In addition to these numbers for gendered inequalities, the
system especially disadvantages black girls and other girls of color: the proportions of youth in correctional facilities are heavily skewed with 855 youth of color, including 377 black youth, in custody for every 95 detained white boys or girls (Snyder 213). Attention to these overlapping oppressions allows a more accurate understanding of the factors leading to the incarceration of girls and the discourses that attempt to frame their experiences.

One method that may help change this system of girls’ disparate treatment and control is gender-specific programming. The U. S. Department of Justice recommends comprehensive programming that considers the gender-specific dangers and risks girls face while enabling “each girl to focus on her individual needs, to understand how risk factors have shaped her development, and to address issues that arise in her relationships with . . . family, peers, community, and society” (“Guiding Principles” n.p.). Significantly, the report also emphasizes teaching “girls to use their voice [sic], to speak for themselves, and to recognize that they have choices (n.p.). If incarcerated girls openly express their voices through media production, their success would reflect, and perhaps substantiate, the Department of Justice’s recommendations. To investigate this and my initial questions, I surveyed youth-produced media from the juvenile justice system. There is very little available or accessible through Internet searches. I found evidence of three relevant artifacts: a one-time chapbook of boys’ writing; an informational comic funded by Making Policy Public and other justice organizations; and the creative writing webzine *The Beat Within*. All of these projects are facilitated, organized and funded by adults outside of the juvenile justice system: the chapbook was compiled by teacher and activist Kevin Coval, and youth were only tangentially involved in the comic through The Youth Justice Board, an after-school program. The content of *The Beat Within* is overwhelmingly produced by boys and is adult-structured, which shifts the focus of this project from girl-produced media to media in which girls have a potentially regulated or minoritized part. However, because it has the most youth contribution, and is the most accessible, longest-term project available, it became the focus of this study.

According to *The Beat Within*’s website, its publishing and workshop programming appear to still be in place. Since
the completion of this project in January 2011, at which point nothing new had been posted for several weeks, ten more issues have appeared on the website; however, none of the PDF issue files include a date and the most recently dated blog entries on the website were posted in June 2010. Efforts to contact editor and co-founder David Inocencio and the office through e-mail and telephone have been as of yet unsuccessful; therefore, we have no information on pertinent details of the process, such as manuscript selection, facilitator training for workshops, or the role, gender or race of those who contribute the commentary published on each piece. These limitations restrict the potential scope of the analysis and conclusions of this project: I have attempted to disclaim assertions about the editors, girls’ involvement, and workshop process when it is not explicit in the zine’s text or mission.

There is undoubtedly value, however, in considering the texts with only the information accessible to a mainstream reader, especially because of this project’s concern with the public image of incarcerated girls and the accessibility of their own voices. In order to determine what discourses of girlhood are present in girls’ contributions to the zine, I use only the details present on its website and printed in its pages. I wanted to survey girls’ contributions across several issues, and I chose to focus on the featured Pieces of the Week in each of the three issues most recently posted to the website: 15.44, 15.45, and 15.46. In addition, I include the Pieces of the Week from issue 15.23, as the Editor’s Note for that issue presents gender roles as a theme. It is important to note that in the Pieces of the Week sections, boys wrote approximately seven out of eight published pieces: each section ranged from 24 to 37 entries, and girls wrote 3 to 5 entries in each, resulting in 16 pieces for analysis. Many of the authors’ names, such as K Jack, Lil’ Dee, and Na Na Holly, read like tags or handles which are often carefully chosen to present a specific persona and may not explicitly mark gender. Because of the difficulty of identifying the writers’ genders, I included for analysis only the entries by authors with marked feminine names, such as Miss Lady and Caressa, and those signed with gender-ambiguous names whose pieces described first-person female experiences. Despite limitations, in order to determine marked feminine names, I used Internet search engines for common pronoun associations and searched online multilingual name databases. For all
issues, I used discourse analysis to discuss patterns and subjectivities that emerged in the girls' contributions and editors' commentaries following a framework built on Anita Harris' model of the can-do and at-risk girl (Future).

It is useful to introduce the girls' contributions to The Beat Within, which identifies itself as a webzine, alongside a discussion of girls' zine writing and how that theory can apply to the contemporary incarcerated girl. Harris asserts that zines emerged "at a time when girlhood itself has a new cultural presence, and young women are negotiating a cultural fascination with, but simultaneous silencing of, their experiences (Resistance 45). Girl power and girls as a relatively new consumer base have led to more public attention to girls' lives, and the taboo of incarceration adds to that fascination while necessitating the silence of its residents. The institutional control of the publication's contributors complicates its zine label because that medium was originally meant to create a space where young women can communicate and organize together outside surveillance, silencing and appropriation (46). Zines have the potential to allow female writers to act without fear of censure; Kristen Schilt has formulated the term c/overt resistance" to characterize girls' zine writing, asserting that zines allow girls to express themselves "to like-minded peers but still remain covert and anonymous to authority figures" (83, 81).

In fact, audience management has been characterized as extremely important to zine writers, especially for those girls who have been victimized by their peers, authority figures, and larger society (Schilt 79, Sinor 255). The community that can form between zine contributors links girls across geographic boundaries, which The Beat Within may facilitate through its inclusion of youth voices across state and county lines (Sinor 244). As the selections from the publication also demonstrate, "[g]irl zinesters write from the personal, telling stories, relating experiences, and ranting about inequality. . . Explorations of body image, sexuality, desire, love, and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are common topics (246). A supportive community of other girls in a safe, expressive and encouraging space is vital to traditional zine production. Whether The Beat Within offers girls this experience will help determine its value to girls particularly, rather than for incarcerated youth in
general that the organization aims to serve (“About Us” n.p.).

In addition to identifying their target population, the mission statement of The Beat Within emphasizes developing literacy and self-expression. One of their modes of encouraging critical thought is offering weekly writing themes in the workshops for each week’s publication. The Editor’s Note in Issue 15.23 asks, “Do you believe there are certain roles that only men should play or only women should play in life? Do not just say, ‘Women should not be airline pilots’ or ‘Only men should be soldiers.’ Explain why you think so” (n.p.). This prompt is approachable and unthreatening, aligning with some of the D.O.J. goals for youth programming. A longer Editor’s Note about gender roles was meant to be published in 15.23, but instead appears in a blog entry for 15.26: staff member Julia introduces that week’s topic by foregrounding her personal problem with gender stereotypes. She describes how society teaches children to conform to roles that originated from the desire to oppress women, then argues against the idea of inherent gender roles, closing with a plea challenging the readers to do what makes them happy and to let others be who they want to be (Editor’s Note n.p.). As an administrator and possible workshop facilitator, Julia is clearly working from a feminist viewpoint within a male-dominated system, which may offer some girls a community, and at least speaks well for the overt gender politics of The Beat Within.

After having analyzed relevant submissions, I suggest that the prototype of the can-do girl is institutionally encouraged and the at-risk girl is overly-regulated. These first examples are of the can-do girl, who is empowered through social approval and, in the case of misfortune, is saved by her own good decision management: she has full access to the kind of capitalist and individualist bootstraps by which she pulls herself out of setbacks, independent of both social services and the class stigma with which they are associated. The zine aims to contribute to the can-do girl’s social empowerment, to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity to share their ideas and life experiences in a safe space that encourages literacy, self-expression, some critical thinking skills, and healthy, supportive relationships with adults and their community (“About Us” n.p.). As Harris notes, with this kind of institutional support, it would appear at first that girls could express
their perspectives better than ever (Resistance 43). However, institutional support for these girls often means institutional control, and in the contemporary context this surveillance and control often takes form through invitation to speech (43). Within this framework, it is significant that the can-do girl tends to invoke true support even while under institutional surveillance.

The can-do girl is typically too motivated and driven toward normative success to perform traditional risk behaviors. One girl contributor in particular addresses drug use and the law in “I Don’t Agree With Prop 19” by Ariel from San Francisco. Ariel argues against legalizing marijuana, and in closing, states, “I disagree with this legalization, but if they do, I would like it if they implement rules to prevent people from getting more addicted and smoke it more. If this happens, it would be a bad example for those who don’t smoke including children and young people (22). The Beat replies, If all people thought the same way as you towards a better future, and the well being of this generation, this world would be a different and better one...You have a very special gift that is your positive guidance and your preoccupation towards others (15.45 22). Ariel displays an investment in following the law, and creates new regulations to amend problems instead of subverting the law. She shows appropriate nurturing instinct toward children and even smokers, and she confidently rejects the legislation while part of a peer group who may disagree. The Beat responds with lavish praise, billing Ariel as a role model and a hope for the future, especially due to her attention to the needs of others. In this case and following examples, the editors’ comments construct a particular frame through which a reader might experience each girl’s writing; additionally, the comments potentially delegitimize alternative readings. Here, the response to Ariel determines her work as an illustration of the kind of normatively ideal girlhood and girl’s voice most valued in the space of the zine.

If a girl is in the juvenile justice system, her path to success is necessarily a nonlinear trajectory which requires extra motivation and flexibility; in a study of the California juvenile justice system, 85% of its incarcerated girls had been suspended or expelled from school at least once (Justice 10). Possibly because academic success is promoted as a cure for the disease of delinquency, the two girls
submissions that talk about educational plans and goals are well-received (Harris, “Future” 28). When Freedom Rings by Phina from Santa Clara details very specific plans about college applications, placement tests, and scholarships, sharing that she can’t wait to be a college girl (9). The Beat responds, “We love it!” and confides that they “already have a vision of how big [she’s] going to make it” (15.44 9). They then ask what her plans are, supporting her own agency in the process. Davina from Alameda’s poem, “Lost In My Own World,” does not offer plans, but starts out despondent: Lost in a world / And it’s so cold, then announces that she wants to feel like royalty, That’s where I want to be / Go to college, live my life / Do everything right (1-2; 18-20). She shows at least an implicit awareness of what is right and that it involves forward motion toward normative success. The Beat has faith in her: [S]tay strong, Davina, keep trying, they say. We know you can make it to college and make real choices for your own life (15.46 8). They trust her to take the appropriate steps, and, in this framework, if she does succeed, her success will undoubtedly be self-made. This success is in contrast with the at-risk girl’s failure. Her institutional disadvantage is re-imagined as personal failing, and within a discussion about the justice system, this illustrates the criminalizing of victimization which is an important factor for the at-risk framework (Chesney-Lind 14-17). If an at-risk girl makes poor choices, especially surrounding early pregnancy or problematic consumption, she needs to be monitored or controlled; however, that same control can be used to keep them on track” if risk factors are identified early (25). Girls’ systematic management is not egalitarian: as Harris asserts, [T]he juvenile justice system serves to keep some young women’s experiences, difficulties, and bodies out of view—specifically, the poor and nonwhite; even when race and class are not explicit in the works quoted here, they are undoubtedly factors of lived experience in the system which need to be read alongside the overt at-risk girl narrative (“Future” 112). This narrative is illustrated below by three girls’ pieces contrasted alongside The Beat’s comments.

Niarenee from Fresno contributes the poem “Tearing Apart,” expressing confusion, frustration, and despair. This excerpt from the middle of the poem demonstrates Niarenee’s struggles, questions, compassion and self-positioning:
I am always being used
Why do people use
Why do people fight
Why do people die every night
I wanna know why
I just want to cry
Think of all the young that die
Hopefully, they went to the big mansion in the sky
[
I’m a good person with many flaws. Don’t make me
mad cuz I snap back like Jaws. (8-21)

Above, Niarenee describes the trauma of conflict and
death and then her response of sorrow and hope. The Beat
replies, We can’t change everything. Some things we just
have to accept. We can start with focusing our thoughts
on those things we can change (15.23 10). This lecture
dismisses Niarenee’s writing and experience despite the
mission statement emphasizing safe space and creative
expression. Perhaps because she self-described as angry,
or because she included no self-regulating plan for
changing her situation, the editor’s response positions her as
at-risk and in need of control. The effects of being positioned
as risk-takers are felt in the bodies of those girls incar-
cerated, detained and contracepted by court order (Harris,
“Resistance” 42). There is no affirmation of Niarenee’s voice.

Davina from Alamenda contributed another poem,
“In My Mind,” in a different issue. Because The Beat
Within works with over 700 youth, editors’ relationships to
contributors are unclear; therefore, I treat Davina’s poems
as independent works. In My Mind contains a plea for
freedom between lines describing discipline, drug use, and
gang membership, and closes with words that could be
construed as self-destructive: This is what we’ve come to / Me killing me before I get to you / But no one can ever fit back
in my shoe” (57-59). The Beat does not offer support,
resources, or encouragement regarding any of these issues.
Instead, they reply, Nice poem! What can you actually
change about your life? Both inside and outside. What can
you do to stay free once you get out? Who can help you?
Who won’t help you? (15.45 22). They do not directly
manage her actions, but do imply she needs to be more like
the self-managed can-do girl who would already have taken
steps toward success.

Along these lines, it is important to note that the at-risk state is depicted as a set of personal limitations that can be overcome through sufficient effort,” and, presumably, the surveillance and management of authority (Harris, Future, 25). In an illustration of this factor, Bella contributes Blind, a poem about regret and looking forward to freedom:

Drugs won't make you happy
I will never again
Choose drugs over family
[...]
I'll give you my all
And all I ask for in return is
Forgiveness! (24-33)

She identifies her at-risk behavior(s) and announces her changed priorities, promising to work as hard as possible toward freedom and self-management. From The Beat: Thanks for sharing that with us, Bella. You have a very powerful voice. Please never forget that, and keep sharing! (15.23 5). With this response, Bella can be read as in-between the at-risk girl requiring adult control and the can-do girl receiving positive feedback on her goals: the editor offers a positive but generic response, perhaps waiting to see what Bella keeps sharing and whether she has the self-motivation to pull herself out of the at-risk subjectivity.

The can-do and at-risk model of girls subjectivities informs critical analyses of contemporary discourses of girlhood; however, the girl as cultural resister is not necessarily part of popular conceptions of girls. Especially within a system of physical containment, the spaces and discourses [girls] can use to complicate contemporary representations of girlhood and articulate resistance are diminishing as a consequence of surveillance, colonization and commodification,” although programs like The Beat Within could potentially help (Harris, Resistance 43). However, the sample culled for this study indicates that the zine does not indulge resistant themes.

To demonstrate The Beat's reactions to girls' resistance, I begin with two poems which have a similar theme but
garner different tones of response. As Chesney-Lind notes, incarcerated girls are more likely to have been physically victimized than girls outside the system, and two poems from the sample describe sexual assault (8). Johniee from Alameda wrote “Something Called Hope,” a graphic description of sexual assault that closes with, “What I’m saying is no joke / So I wonder will there ever be hope? (14-15). She asserts the pain and truth of her story and asks for help. The Beat’s response is very supportive, repeating that “[T]here is hope and there is help,” then offering a confidential and free hotline, emphasizing that Johniee is not alone (“15.45” 21).

In contrast, Atirra from Alameda’s piece, “Mom Wasn’t There,” uses an angry and resistant tone rather than a scared one; her distress centered around an absent mother figure. Of 34 lines, the fourth and fifth are, “You allowed me to get raped, / And when I tried to tell you the truth you didn’t want to believe me. Other lines repeat, “I’ll be damned,” and at the end Atirra repeats, “I lied to you” (10-11, 16-17; 43-44). Atirra resists the normative constructs of a deferential daughter or despondent victim. An editor replies, “There’s a whole lot of anger jumping at us from your page. We can tell that your mother’s behavior really pisses you off. Have you told her how you feel?” (“15.44” 15). There is no address either of her assault or of her courage in sharing her story. Atirra’s anger is treated as hostile and unproductive instead of powerful and agential, while Johniee’s sorrowful description of victimization and subsequent survival is rewarded with institutional and emotional support.

As opposed to Atirra’s resistance of normative roles, other girls write in critique of institutional forces that affect girls’ lives. “Evil Eye” by Tashanna from Alameda addresses the eye of the media as it influences body image and conceptions of beauty. “It’s a shame you’re so smooth how you influence on TV,” she says, closing with:

You make the bad look good in most situations
All these fake imitations, fake boobs, and fake
Attitudes but it’s something I live by
But is it really the bad man’s rule
That I repress each day (12-16)

Besides its media commentary, Tashanna’s poem reveals that popular ideals are something I live by and illustrates
the kind of resistance referenced in Angela McRobbie’s theory that some girls reject the de-individualized school system by exaggerating the femininity that is tacitly encouraged (qtd. in Hudson 40). An editor responds: Is the evil eye the media? Is it the image they place on ads of how a young lady SHOULD look according to society? Which is usually an anorexic blond haired woman? What’s beautiful to you? (15.45 9). *The Beat* assumes details about the kind of appearance or femininity that is (or should be?) threatening to Tashanna, and that she tries to imitate: Tashanna’s words do not specify what fake is to her, while *The Beat* fills in that space with the most normative ideal, while labeling the women who represent it. They only ask what Tashanna is resisting and striving to attain after defining it for her. Her choice to omit this information or, in fact, any girl’s choice to not speak can also have resistant power. As Harris states, “[T]he act of refusal to speak to unworthy listeners re-positions young women from an accessible and often vulnerable population to autonomous agents entitled to accountability, self-representation and informed participation (Resistance 53). I have no information on which incarcerated girls participate in *The Beat Within* workshops, but it is worth considering that choosing not to submit personal writing to public commentary and display is a resistant action, especially if a girl feels or understands that her voice may be regulated or devalued. The knowledge that the zine has a larger male than female audience, and the awareness that her writing will likely appear surrounded by boys’ work, may be an additional disincentive for explicit expression and may encourage subversion of the workshop system.

Considering the weight of institutional constraints on incarcerated girls discourse, what are the expectations of and possibilities for programs that explicitly value their voices? Although this study has limitations, other work has been done on what programming for incarcerated youth could look like. For example, the American and National Bar Associations have identified that there is currently “a glaring dearth of appropriate, developmentally sound, culturally competent, gender-specific prevention, diversion and treatment programs for girls in the justice system (Justice 4). Youth outreach and empowerment programs like *The Beat Within* seem to aim to address this problem: for example, the zine’s mission emphasizes building relationships
outside of the system, which is another recommendation of the report, and several of the editors’ comments showed the kind of culturally sensitive practices with girls the Bar Associations want to see identified and supported by the system (5, 27). However, Barbara Hudson reports that even fully-trained and presumably culturally sensitive social workers and teachers have conceptions of ideal femininity that can be difficult to separate from the girls they serve (38-39). When the situation is complicated by prominent stereotypes of incarcerated girls, it is unsurprising that, as Hudson concludes, even well-meaning workers want teenage girls to fall into traditional gender performance roles. In an ideal reformulation of *The Beat Within* or any gender-specific programming according to Department of Justice standards, staff and educator awareness training on girls’ particular challenges, strengths, and need for a safe and productive expressive outlet would be required. That outlet could take many forms, but recommendations for program structure that could help facilitate open expression include using sensitive female staff, including girls’ voices in their activities, and specific attention to self-esteem building and building healthy relationships (Garcia and Lane 238).

There are several potential avenues for further research on this topic. The rich archive of 220 free and easily-accessible issues of *The Beat Within* present youth writing on several discourses of at-risk and can-do youth, as well as creative writing and other social discourses such as affect, race, class, kin, violence, and resistance. Race and racialized experiences in the system are especially urgent issues, given that, [I]n the U.S. juvenile justice system at least, race frequently overrides class as a stratification device, such that unlike white girls, African-American and Latina girls are suspended at almost the same rates as their male counterparts (Harris, “Future” 111). How do these youth negotiate race in the system, and how do they represent it through writing? If researchers were able to access information on the process behind workshops, facilitator training, submission selection, and youth involvement at *The Beat Within*, they could add valuable

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2 Please refer to Garcia and Lane’s 2010 article, *Looking in the Rearview Mirror: What Incarcerated Women Think Girls Need From The System*, for recommendations on programming for incarcerated girls and women not specific to creative expression.
perspective to the assumptions and conclusions drawn in this paper. It is likely that incarcerated girls produce much more media through means inaccessible by the Internet; those texts could offer a means of comparison with this publication as well as raise questions about incarcerated girls’ resources, audiences and leadership. Finally, what may be the most important avenue of study surrounding any girls is to involve girls themselves in the process through an ethnographic study. How do they experience the justice system, and how would they like to represent themselves? What programming or conditions would make their lives better and their voices better heard?

After examining *The Beat Within*, the most visible and prominent media to which incarcerated girls in America contribute, it seems to support Harris’ views that:

young women are encouraged to speak their stories and provide narratives of their experiences, but at the same time they risk these narratives being scrutinized, interrogated, appropriated and depoliticized. In short, it could be argued that the more young women speak, the less free they are (Resistance 44).

The zine is part of the larger institutions of the correctional system and mainstream society, both of which perhaps inherently subscribe to the can-do and at-risk girl discourses. Even when in the minority, the editorial voices of the publication which regulate and limit girls’ expression and are part of the larger story of media production in the juvenile justice system. The avenues to this production need to be reimagined as carriers of girls’ authentic voices: only then will the system help support girls personal expression and community-building while offering a way for mainstream culture (and policy makers) to understand the experiences, needs, and politics of voices so often silenced.
Works Consulted


Works Cited


