

# I JUST WONDERED IF I CAN DO THINGS ON MY OWN AND DON'T HAVE NOBODY TELL ME WHAT I CAN AND CANNOT DO. I KNOW BETTER: LETTERS TO THE WORLD FROM INSIDE OF A SEGREGATED SHELTERED WORKSHOP

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*The segregation and exploitation of people oppressed by the label of intellectually disabled is pervasive and commonplace but underinvestigated academically. This article enacts an interrelational method to interrogate the cultural practices and dynamics that are used to subjugate based on categories related to intellectual capacity. In order to explore moral exclusion and structural violence the words of a woman captured through published letters from within a sheltered workshop (factory-like spaces of exclusion claiming to support people with disabilities) are intertwined with the scholar activist's stance of the author. Along with the examination of these abusive practices, this article is inspired by the radical possibilities contained in the published letters from the author within the sheltered workshop, as the writer of the letters envisions desire as a form of resistance and as she reimagines subjects as agents. In place of conclusions, the article generates difficult questions cradled by uncomfortable reflexivity about power and academic exploitation in the name of activism.*

**Keywords:** structural violence, moral exclusion, intellectual disability, narrative analysis, sheltered workshops

## 1. Introduction

This is an article that straddles uncomfortable reflexivity (Pillow, 2003), guilt, interrelationality, the subject/object divide, activism and exploitation. This is an article that wants to honor a life but is terrified of instead exploiting it in the name of “academic activism”. It is an article riddled with uncertainties, blurred lines, and concerns. It is an article that insists on being a vehicle for a perspective without flattening and reappropriating the voice of the “Other”. Yet, it is an article that doubts such feat is ever possible without at least some reinforcement and reiteration of the very same structural violence that is being challenged. This article pivots around the letters produced by a

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woman, a friend, by someone who experiences exclusion from society due to her cognitive diagnosis.

The author of the letters I have analyzed, to provide a textured description of the experience of moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990) and structural violence, the wellspring behind this article, is a poetic elderly woman in her late 70s. These letters, entitled *Letters from the Boss* were the primary written work to be included in online and printed newsletters, composed monthly for a creative art/urban farming social justice intervention she participated in (Enewsletters, 2012). Prior to the formation of the program, The Boss (a nickname I will use because it is one she deeply loved and the one that was on the nametag she wore everyday) was engaged in warehouse work at the sheltered workshop where the creative program was situated. After work, she would go home to a residential group home that was composed of six duplexes. She shared her duplex with another elderly woman. Her care at home was provided by rotating staff that were coordinated by a manager and a caseworker. This is a typical arrangement for many adults in the United States who grapple with the violent label of “intellectually disabled”. While I do not want to excessively focus on the label itself, and instead I want to redirect the attention to the processes of exclusion and exploitation, I will momentarily pause to explain my discomfort with this label. Collaborating intimately for years with artists who are labeled this way by medical institutions, I learned that not a single individual utilized the identity marker of intellectually disabled and only paid-support associated with the person accessed this language, generally not in the presence of the individual, confining it to institutional operations. Therefore, I have come to strongly question whether this label of intellectually disabled might be a tool of violence and oppression.

The Boss was one of the first people I had met at the sheltered workshop. Her blue eyes shone with a warm sort of mischievousness and her soft southern accented voice was irresistibly welcoming. She had a keen way of cradling my hand in hers and peering deep into my eyes while she spoke. Her daily routine while I knew her was mesmerizing and rhythmic. Each morning she arrived, slowly navigated her walker from the bus drop-off to the room, sat down with a notebook and her collection of pens and began to write. On the lined paper, her beautiful, gently trembling cursive handwriting would unfurl poetry in a language no one but she could understand. This would go on until her name was called in the afternoon over a large institutional intercom when her bus would arrive. Talking to the individuals who cared for her at home I learned that when she arrived, she descended the bus, slowly walked to her bedroom, gathered her pens, and began to write.

Before I introduce the analysis of a set of letters produced by The Boss, I want to sketch a broader landscape. Before I explain my relationship to the woman whose words I now elevate to provide the lived experience of structural violence, I will offer a historic and theoretical grounding for the practices of exclusion inflicted on people oppressed by the label of intellectually disabled.

### ***1.1 Intellectual Disability: Chameleon Category with Clear Impact***

By many measurable, descriptive, and anecdotal accounts, people oppressed with the label of intellectual disabilities are among the most stigmatized in society (Thomas, 2000). The definition of the category of intellectually disabled has been slippery through

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time and space. Today, according to the American Association on Intellectual Disabilities, if someone's IQ is measured as below 70-75 this indicates limited intellectual functioning. Despite the amorphous nature of the category, the label significantly impacts people's lives. While no longer euthanized or forcefully sterilized, as was the horrific reality of the past, lives of those labeled as intellectually disabled unfolds in an environment that is steeped in structural violence, violence that is both blatant and subtle. Professionals and the non-segregated society have reframed the structural violence that produces and normalizes the exclusion and segregation of people with intellectual disabilities as morally justified and clinically ethical. The abuse made possible by the structural violence can manifest in explicit forms such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse but also less explicitly as exploitation, segregation, neglect, and inappropriate use of restrictive procedures such as overmedication (Thornberry & Olson, 2005). Regardless of the form, the systems of exclusion are remarkably global, enacted in countries often understood as the most powerful, such as the U.S., as well as in countries that are not perceived as occupying a central role on the international stage such as Sweden (Kulick & Rydström, 2015).

During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the push towards the deinstitutionalization of large asylums containing people with disabilities inadvertently generated the formation of small and equally segregating institutions, perpetuating the marginalization and normalization of exclusion (Carey, 2009). These newly created spaces were characterized as protective institutions shielding the vulnerable from the potential harm and hurt found in the larger community. Recreation facilities, camps, sheltered workshops, and segregated housing institutions reinforced perceptions of helplessness and dependency while contributing to the high rate of abuse present in people deprived from contact with the larger community (Enns, 2001). Within these institutions, the skills taught are largely irrelevant to the needs of the integrated society and instead are adapted to the segregated environment making financial independence impossible (Thornberry & Olson, 2005). Based on these documented pervasive restrictions, based on the tangible structural violence of abusive institutions, based on the dehumanization, and the practice of segregation I would like to propose that an environment has been crafted in which people with intellectual disabilities are perceived as outside of the scope of justice (Opatow, 1990) embedded within a disablist society. According to Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011), it is the processes of disablism that produces violence relationally, institutionally, and culturally.

## ***1.2 Moral Exclusion***

This isolation from the community encourages an environment in which people with intellectual disabilities are subjected to forms of violence explained away as necessary and justified due to the low status associated with individuals with this label. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2011) identify four elements of disablist violence, real, psychoemotional, systematic, and cultural. Consistent with the applicability of structural violence, the social and political origins of these constraints and violations have been neglected. Instead, the characteristics of the individuals in the institutions are used to

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explain the necessity of segregation. The violence has been relegated to the bodies of individuals oppressed with these societal labels.

This justification of segregation and structural violence may be understood through the theoretical framework of moral exclusion (Opotow, 1990), which very much considers that “violent acts against disabled people can only be understood by reflecting on the wider circulating practices of disablism culture” (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011, p. 604). According to Opotow (1990), moral exclusion is enacted when individuals or groups are perceived as nonentities, expendable or not deserving of rights due to being placed outside of the boundaries in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. The structural violence enacted by the hierarchy of group homes, is one example of how moral exclusion is manifested for persons labeled as intellectually disabled. Individuals who live in such staffed group homes frequently experience tensions between their personal needs and wants and the values of staff and professional pressures inflicted upon the staff members. This is especially evident when desire and the need for intimacy are expressed by women and men living in these staff run group homes. In residential settings, staff are warned of expulsion from their care positions if anyone engages in sexual acts while they are working (Winges-Yanez, 2014).

Similarly, sheltered workshops are another site of structural violence where people are perceived as outside of moral values, rules, and considerations, or in other words, where moral exclusion is enacted. Sheltered workshops are one of the rare situations in the U.S. that allows individuals to receive less than the federally mandated minimum wage for working. In fact, people often get paid less than a dollar per hour for repetitive, meaningless labor while the business receives tax benefits as a nonprofit. Research in the structural violence and moral exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is lacking, only a few researchers have documented the violence of these institutions, including punishments ranging from isolation to removal of privileges if residents engage in affectionate acts such as kissing or holding hands. Scaffolding the social psychological cognitive and justificatory framework of moral exclusion is the ubiquitous cultural violence of disablism, that underpins the real, psychoemotional, and systemic acts of violence (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011).

### ***1.3 Missing Voices: The Structural Violence of Academic Exclusion***

The physical and psychological distance generated by segregated institutions such as sheltered workshops and group homes foster the continued moral exclusion of those perceived as included in this group (Opotow, 1990), but psychological literature has failed to satisfyingly address such exclusion. A majority of the research related to those labeled by society as intellectually disabled relates to the potential of deviance or the potential of abuse (e.g. Toomey, 1993; Trudel & Desjardins, 1992; Blanchard, Watson, Choi, Dickey, Klasson, Kuban, & Farren, 1999). Not only has research neglected the moral exclusion of those repressed by the label of intellectual disability but existing research has largely failed to include, elevate, and privilege the voices of individuals who grapple with the lived experience of this structural violence, a criticism echoed by feminist disability scholars (see Garland-Thomson, 2005, for discussion). This absence is

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not an indication of silence, but is a violent act of silencing potentially illuminating the structural violence embedded within academia itself.

Despite the decades of advocacy both from within the disability rights field and outside of it, a majority of the academic literature related to the lives of individuals labeled as intellectually disabled continues to be from the perspective of clinicians, families standing in as a proxy for the persons, social workers, psychologists, and other persons in supportive roles (e.g. Boer, Tough & Haaven, 2004; Edgerton, 1963; Klotz, 2004; Servais, 2006). These academic documents thus fail to enter into the lived realities of people with intellectual disabilities. Without elevating the voices and insights produced by individuals who society labels as intellectually disabled, there is an increased probability of misrepresentation and distortion and therefore a perpetuation of the structural violence. Consistent with the scholarship generated by feminist disability theorists, I follow this legacy by excavating dismissed voices, misrepresented or denied experiences to illuminate the interstitial dynamics between bodies (Garland-Thomson, 2005). It is from this space of thick contradiction and uncomfortable reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) that I work from in this article.

The moral exclusion of people who are socially labeled as intellectually disabled is not unique to psychology; other disciplines have reinforced this institutional and epistemological violence. For example, an explicit justification for the moral exclusion of people with cognitive disabilities is found in contemporary philosophy (McMahan, 2009). McMahan writes that people with “radical cognitive limitations” are not capable of intimate personal relations based on deep mutual understanding. His argument is that these individuals are less than human and should be considered outside of the scope of what it means to be human, morally and otherwise (McMahan, 2009, p. 240). Such painfully blatant justifications of the structural violence highlight the social forces that allow for the institutional, personal, and political mistreatment of people labeled as intellectually disabled as it codifies the unjust perception of those who carry this label as less than human, disposable, and not deserving of equality (Opotow, 1990; Fine & Asch, 1988).

#### ***1.4 Precarious Contribution: Presenting a Gift Woven by Another Artist***

This article takes on the precarious task of understanding the experience of moral exclusion from the vantage point of a person grappling with forces of structural violence (such as sheltered workshops and staff run group homes) that oppress individuals labeled as intellectually disabled. As detailed above, psychology’s history of focusing on the potential deviance or the extreme vulnerability of people with intellectual disabilities has not done enough to understand what it feels like to live, rebel, laugh, love, advocate, empower, grow, resist, suffer, remember, hope, and yearn within these structures fashioned by a socially constructed inequality. In short, it has sought to fix oppressive notions of disability within bodies, rather than reimagine disability as a consequence of power relations. In response to this gap in research and to the epistemological violence (Teo, 2008) of the existing methods, this article is written in a novel methodology that brings together several social psychological frameworks of inquiry to elevate the lived

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experience of one particular individual who grapples with these dynamics of structural violence and moral exclusion. This task, as it is invented, is simultaneously questioned.

In the admittedly precarious attempt to delicately share a life, a perspective, the joys and pains of another without reappropriating and losing the power of the other over me, I have grazed inspiration from a number of minds in philosophy and psychology. The methodology I will draw on for the analysis will involve the dynamic layering of several theoretical lenses, that of moral exclusion, critical bifocality, and narrative in context. An understanding of the experience of moral exclusion from within a violent system cannot be separated from its historical, political, and social context. With the brief introduction above, I want to hold the individual's relationship to history, policy, structures, and the individual's intertwined nature with others. This article dreams of forging a methodological framework that combines the theoretical questioning of moral exclusion and the telescoping dynamism of critical bifocality. Critical bifocality compels researchers to allow theory and analysis to unfold in a framework that honors the inseparability of lives from structures (Fine & Weis, 2012). Honoring the value of seeking to understand lives in context, I attempt to weave together my voice with that of another while simultaneously untangling history, policy, and structures to understand what moral exclusion feels like from within and how it is resisted. I hope to create a tapestry of possibilities, solidarity, and learning by weaving together disparate and distinct fibers of understanding. In the spirit of critical bifocality, I dance between a close reading of the narrative undulations of the letters produced within an institution and the social and cultural forces that situate these letters within the rhythmic landscape of moral exclusion.

While, in part, I explore moral exclusion from the perspective of someone who is morally excluded based on a label, I have a more complicated fantasy for what I can accomplish. I draw attention to intangible concepts such as dreams, desires, wisdom and vulnerability found in the letters. From the complexity of her words I hope to carve out a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) from which we can, using the approach of critical bifocality, interrogate the structural violence, related patterns, contributing ideological frameworks found in society while simultaneously imagining radical possibilities of equality and nonviolent inclusion.

## **2. Method**

I hinted at the story of how my voice and The Boss's voice (represented in the words of her letters) are intertwined in the past and now in the present, but this must be addressed explicitly as well. I collaborated with The Boss, the author of the letters for three and a half years. I directed and co-founded the alternative space where she worked after being brought in at the inception of the project by a social practice artist.

This space was situated within a sheltered workshop (a closed factory-like institution claiming to provide vocational training to people with disabilities while paying far below minimum wage) that was founded in the early 70s. This new program was a radical experiment of attempting to inspire an intervention to challenge the violence of the institution. It was situated within the Alternative to Employment (ATE) room of this

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institution. Historically the ATE space was where people who could not perform the rote, factory style work would spend their days surrounded by coloring books and Disney movies. A space of neglect and sadness. The alternative project blossoming from this forgotten space of forgotten people was and continues to be difficult to define in part because we, the artists, the neighbors, the staff, purposefully embraced ambiguity. The space was an art studio, gallery, community space, urban farm. It included over 50 people who experienced the structural violence of institutionalization. It also included others who were not labeled by society as intellectually disabled. These were artists who used the space as their own space of productivity, friends, community members, and paid staff. In this ambiguous space I (as the director of the alternative project) met The Boss, the author of the letters. Shortly after meeting her, I learned of her many passions. The joy of expressing herself, sharing stories, dreams, memories and wisdom, consumed her days and may have been one of her greatest passions as she either wrote these down in a language only she could understand or told them to someone to transcribe.

The individuals participating in the program prior to deciding to join the new space were often engaged in factory type work for many decades in the sheltered workshop. The collaborators involved in the project wanted to create an environment where each person could pursue his or her greatest passion. The space and the activities possible within it expanded the definition of art, work, and productivity. Whatever one's passions were we sought to celebrate that interest and skill as their art. With this in mind, we quickly understood that The Boss dreamed of having a desk on which to write and oversee the events in the space. My collaborators and I acquired a desk for her. Each day I would sit next to her and hear of her life. Sometimes, she would tell me poetry she would compose on the spot, other times she would invite me into her memories by painting the past with her words. Within a few months of knowing her, we began to publish a roughly-monthly newsletter detailing the activities of the creative and agricultural adventures of the social justice intervention we all participated in. Each month, in one of our daily conversations I would ask her what she would like to include in that newsletter, which together we referred to as a letter to the world. Each month she would share her thoughts with me and I would transcribe them as she spoke to me.

## **2.1 *Our Intertwined Voices***

The relational context of any interview is relevant when considering narrative analysis, but it is essential to this insight into structural violence. Gergen (2009) believes that as researchers we coproduce the world we present. This coproduction is true in this case as the Boss's life is embodied in her words, which are inspired by the life she lived, in all its situated complexity. Her words and her life at the time that she dictated her words to me emerge from an environment in which I also existed and thrived. As the transcriber and now the one ushering this text into a new environment, I am inscribed in her world and words. A dialogical perspective can further explicate this multi-voiced investigation. Dialogism constructs an understanding of the individual that is fundamentally interrelational, in such a way that the self and the other are defined in terms of the influence one has on the other (Salgado & Clegg, 2011). Our dialogic relation evolved during our interactions in the past but continues to grow, shift, and

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expand in the present. Our interrelationality is structurally and temporally situated, both in the past, the present, and the future, challenging assumptions of individuality embedded in traditional research.

The Boss's phenomenological account of her experiences is woven with strands of me. These influences were not intentional and not inspired by a motive of power, they were unavoidable as we were included in each other's social realities. We co-constructed each other's worlds and selves. Today I think through moral exclusion, critical bifocality, and resistance with strands of The Boss running through the fiber of my being. As referenced by Josselson (2011), Roland Barthes investigates the plurality of a text by tracing the meaning of the word itself. The etymology of text links to the Latin *textus*, which means woven. Josselson plays with this metaphor and speaks of thought as a thread, and the narrator as a spinner of yarns, the storyteller is a weaver. Besides an exploration of the macrosocial facets of structural violence translating into and being resisted by everyday experiences, this analysis is a woven tapestry in honor of a woman's beautiful perspective, words, and life.

### **3. Data: Fleeting and Precarious**

Over the three and a half years that I collaborated with The Boss, she published texts on the blog telling the story of the social justice intervention, as part of her artwork with texts accompanying her paintings, and in the newsletters. For this analysis, I am focusing on only the writings found in the newsletters as attention to the audience is consistent in that platform. Roughly the same prompt was given for each writing interaction. With time the program was celebrated by the community and The Boss and other participants interacted daily with dozens of people who were not direct participants in the program. These individuals would come in to collaborate (as artists), to learn urban farming (and help support the efforts to grow produce on the farm), or just to find a place with dynamic and accepting interactions. When writing these letters, the prompt would set these visitors as the audience. Outside of the prompts asking her what she would like to say to her friends each month and what was on her mind, I simply wanted to explore where The Boss would steer the conversation; therefore ours was a purposefully fluid and open prompt. Once transcribed, my editing of the text included amendments such as creating new paragraphs when during the conversation she seemed to switch topics or if it was a natural place to organize the letter based on the qualities of her speech or on the topic. No new textual content was added by me. The letters from The Boss were the very first written text in the newsletter, usually beneath the image of a visual artwork from the studio that served as a header.

By starting off these newsletters (read by followers of the program both from within disability rights communities, the art community, and general community) with The Boss's letters, we were sending a very intentional message of our priorities. We hoped to trouble expected hierarchies found in similar settings (where people who are categorized as disabled are referred to as patients and are nameless and faceless, grouped en masse) and to gently mock the approach frequently found in the nonprofit world where the powerful person writes a formulaic letter to the patrons. Instead, these letters varied in



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content and were often poetic expositions on life, love, and the systems that the program existed within. At the time when The Boss dictated these letters to me to be published in the newsletters, there was no intention of any kind of analysis for content. For the present paper, I gathered these letters from the archived newsletters and created a single document for analysis.

### ***3.1 The Setting for and the Wholeness of the Raw Letters***

It is 8:30 in the morning on the West Coast. The highways of this large city are returning to a gentle lull after the morning's rush hour. The row of inconspicuous warehouses minutes from the heart of the city suddenly teems with activity. Small accessible city buses pull up to the open garage doors and lower creaky lifts holding people in wheelchairs or gripping onto walkers. As suddenly as the teeming began the frantic activity outside comes to a halt, the parking lot is quiet, the doors are closed, another day has started at this sheltered workshop.

The quiet of the outside hides the throngs of bodies inside. In one warehouse, 40 people are arranged in lines. All face an imaginary audience somewhere behind the closed warehouse doors. They do not sit still, some with labored movements leaning out from electric wheelchairs and others with a dancer's fluidity untangle piles of wire hangers, a task done at this sheltered workshop for pennies per hour. Through a heavy door, the lunchroom has a few sleepy bodies slumped over a table or pacing near a corner. Through another door, a small parking lot leads to another large building. Here, at a brightly painted red desk, The Boss dictates another letter to the world. I provide them in their entirety because I want to carve out a meaningful space for The Boss's voice alongside mine. These two letters are representative of her writing over the three years,

I love pancakes. And I also like turnips. And pickled beets! That's my favorite (giggles). And, let's see what else. I like green beans. Cabbage. I'm thinkin' now (giggles). Meat loaf. Upside down bread. And I like workin' up in here with you guys. You guys always help me, doin' paperwork and stuff. With numbers and I love it. And things like that. And I like commotion on it. I want to work with you. Then I want to get my own business something. Things like that. And everything. And have it right in here. Even for my business at home, I can bring some work from home to work and I can do half of it at home and the other half of it up here. You think it could work? When I find out, that's what I wanted to do. I want everyone else to do it too. I want everyone else to do what they love. And everything. I want, different filing cabinets. A red one I can lock. I can carry the key around my neck.

Like your job, and things like that, and do what things are best for you. The heck with them! That's what I do. Cause I love my work and I always have been. I want to keep it up that way. My birthday is on Thursday! Have some roses up here on my desk. Some by your computer, by my computer too. A small one. Roses. Red. I like to get everything put together. I love my job. I got the sweetest boss. And, I just wondered if I can do things on my own and don't have nobody tell me what I can and cannot do. I know better. I

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know what I can take and what I can't take, see what I mean? I need one more thing... different colors of notebooks. Some red, some pink, some of them blue. And a green one. Have it mixed colors. Reason I thought about that is because there's a lot of people here. I want to have them write their phone numbers, names, where they live things like that. And I thought about you to take me to house to house and everything, I will talk to them and everything I'll tell them I love them, I love my job, I want to keep it that way. I can write things down. And numbers. Things like that. I got nice friends up here, working here. Write this down up there too. If anyone has any problems or anything, and, I will sit down and talk to them. And if I see something I don't like, if they doin' something else, that is a no no. You come to me, only me and my partner, if you have any problems.

How do I finish the letter...? PS. Do everything I can to help you guys out and doin' the right way. There's another thing I want you to write down. I want to make sure everyone at work hears what I want to say, I want to keep it that way. so I can mark everything down, what you think, what you like to do. What you don't want to do. I want to make sure and you guys just keep your jobs workin' with me. I want to understand where you guys are comin' from. I love everybody up here. PS. You guys are my favorite and will always will be. I love you dearly very much. PS. (Enewsletter, 2012)

A frequent theme illuminated within the letters is the theme of love, which I will return to later. The following letter illustrates the beauty and complexity of the Boss's framing of desire. It was dictated about a year after the previous letter at the same vivid red desk.

Scott was my first love.

He helped me a lot. We do things together. And everything. We hold each other hand to hand. And everything. We do things together. We go to the movies .We went to dances once in awhile. I would see movies and things like that. Or else we'd stay home and watch TV.

I went to school with him. We had classes together. We sat side by side. He is all sweet and would buy me candy in a box like this (holds hands out). And everything. I love you. And everything. And everything. He told me to open up. Inside it was a ring. He put it on my left hand. It was like an engagement ring. And we'd been going together for almost 20 years. We have almost set the date. Then someone else came along and everything, and broke us up. That was it.

Something tells me and I did. I met someone. His name is Dave, David. He is a nice guy. And everything. He would do anything for me. And, he helps me. And everything. He takes me out and things like that. He is nice. He would do anything for me.

He is kind of heavy set. Strong guy. Muscles. Blue eyes, just like mine. He is a nice guy. He takes me out places and things like that.

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I like to do things. On my own. I still do. I want to prove to everybody. I can do things for myself. He helps me to read and spell and do numbers and stuff. Things like that. He makes me feel strong.  
I've had two loves in my life. I started thinking I might get lucky. I think somebody cares about me.  
I don't know what to do. I don't know who to turn to.  
I want somebody to love me. Someone to trust. I would give them a ring. A wedding band.  
I like to do things by myself. And everything.  
I love to can. I would give them away to you. I know how to make apple butter. Strawberry shortcakes. I can mash them up and make them into toppings.  
I can't tell you the secret to love. You have to find it out. That's the way I did.  
Love (Enewsletter, 2012).

### ***3.2 Analyzing for Themes that Reflect and Resist Structural Violence***

These letters not only illuminate the deeply oppressive structures that claim to support people with intellectual disabilities but also highlight the way in which this injustice is resisted and challenged from within. By exploring the complexity of the narrative, I hope to dismantle dichotomous thinking that favors the organization of overarching labels, such as intellectual disability. These labels are applied to “traits that may have little in common in order to create a social class of people designated as defective and politically, economically, and socially discriminated against” (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1558). Josselson (1995) tells us that narratives “are a meaning making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of life” (p. 33). The letters reveal not only the tragedy of an institutionalized life, and the consequences of moral exclusion, but also the beauty and richness of the everyday, the unexpected resilience and wisdom of those on the margins, and the courage it takes to hold onto and express desire. Utilizing the tools of narrative-in-context personality research, as described by Suzanne Ouellette (2008), I have woven together the letters with interpersonal, social, cultural, and political contexts surrounding it in order to celebrate and elevate the complexity of individuals who are made invisible and even forgotten.

I applied a variety of methods to analyze the letters to explore how The Boss experiences, resists, and challenges the nature of moral exclusion. I first employed the narrative analysis methods developed by Susan Chase and Ruthellen Josselson. As suggested by Chase (2003), I repeatedly read through the letters and coded them according to feeling and major idea. My codes identified strands of resistance and resilience. After coding the both letters, I named broad categories to pull together sets of codes and ideas found in the first step. These categories are the ones included in the final analysis.

I also extended this tapestry beyond the text itself in a practice of both hermeneutics of restoration and hermeneutics of demystification (Josselson, 2004). The Boss's words are powerful and provocative and it is an honor to remain faithful to the text as published by elevating the content as composed without any alteration. In the spirit of Josselson's

hermeneutics of demystification I explore its potentially unintended meanings, both the explicit and implicit. To identify the potentially unsayable, I have attempted to embed the content of the letters in a politically aware analysis of the systems we existed within. As an activist I was interested in the structural violence of the system at the time of our collaboration, so my perspective was shaped by this inquiry. The process of demystifying the text involved identifying this information in relationship to the text. Theoretically driven by Fine’s critical bifocality, I have also analyzed the content of the letters in light of the subjective, political, social, and historical world that The Boss was immersed in. In other words, I attempted to engage a hermeneutics of demystification and go beyond the explicit text to the world that I am aware of as someone whose vantage point is deeply situated in critical social psychology. Using the contents of the letters as a source of light, I aimed to illuminate the pervasive structural violence that enables the oppression of individuals labeled as intellectually disabled.

#### 4. Themes

I found five resonant themes found in her letters: the desire to progress and grow, desire for self-agency, desire to express care and love, illuminating the rigidity of the sheltered workshop and segregation, and the desire to experience intimate love.

In Table 1 below, I have applied the framework introduced by by Opotow, Gerson, and Woodside (2005) to elevate the subtle and blatant representations as well as the narrow and wide forms of moral exclusion found in the letters. In the table I have included the definitions offered by Opotow and how these unfold within the letters.

**Table 1. Moral Exclusion in the Letters**

	Subtle		Blatant	
Narrow	From Opotow: Rudeness, intimidation, and derogation (bullying and sexual harassment)	From the letters: lack of privacy, perceived as incompetent	From Opotow: Persecution and violence directed at particular individuals or groups (e.g., hate crimes, witch hunts)	From the letters: Prevented from acting on own agency, negated independence
Wide	From Opotow: Oppression and structural violence (e.g., racism, sweatshop, poverty, domestic violence)	From the letters: Limited opportunities for passion, productivity, and joy under the structural violence of a sheltered workshop	From Opotow: Direct violence and violations of human rights (e.g., ethnic cleansing, mass murder, inquisitions)	From the letters: Restricted from experiencing and sharing intimacy and affection

Table 1 above illustrates the way that moral exclusion unfurls within a single life, as captured by the letters. Blatant, subtle, narrow and wide forms of moral exclusion excavated from the letters and shape as emotions, hopes, dreams, and disappointments. Thus, the Boss’s text contributes an affective understanding of moral exclusion.

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#### **4.1 Theme 1: Responding to and Challenging Segregation**

The movement to deinstitutionalize, inadvertently generated smaller institutions rather than fully integrated alternatives (Carey, 2009). Like others who are entangled in the supposed supportive institutions that claim to protect people with intellectual disabilities, the Boss's life, when not at a sheltered workshop, was spent inside of a group home where a rotating team of staff cooked her meals and washed her clothes. "I love pancakes. And I also like turnips. And pickled beets! That's my favorite. (giggles) And, let's see what else. I like green beans. Cabbage. I'm thinkin' now (giggles). Meat loaf. Upside down bread." As The Boss begins this letter to the world with poetics inspired by flavors from her memories, she simultaneously reclaims her right to them. While in these institutions individuals are not given the opportunity to exercise self-agency when it comes to creating and managing space, we are brought to a place where pickled beets are a radical recollection of independence and competence. Transported by segregated buses, her days were spent at a sheltered workshop minutes from the heart of a major West Coast city but in sheltered workshops people rarely encounter anyone outside of its walls. Her letters illuminate the literal concrete walls around her. With patience and persistence, her letters also begin to carve windows and doors into the metaphorical barriers around her.

Spatially the letters imagine ways the environment could be improved and the ways one could grow within it. These expressions of professional plans such as starting her own business, organizing different colors of folders, implicitly explore the limits of the sheltered workshop where individuals would perform whatever contract work was available, such as sorting hangers or measuring out powder. Each body represents a certain amount of funds for the sheltered workshop. In an attempt to increase their profits, sheltered workshops frequently employ the same strategies as airlines. More people are brought into the sheltered workshops than can fit, anticipating absences. This results in frequently overcrowded conditions within the warehouses and result in taxed support staff, leading to frequent turnovers. In the letters, The Boss weaves in gentle requests for her community to not leave her.

Over the years that she published these letters, she frequently wrote of her aspirations to create windows (in the studio where she worked) where walls are. Replacing concrete with windows to inspire curiosity simultaneously cultivates an environment that enables the justice of recognition (Fraser, 1995). Made invisible by violent structures and dehumanizing labels, the letters provoke not only the ability to see these pains but to imagine ways they could be different. The Boss's words concretely challenge the institution, beginning with the walls and windows with phrases responding to and challenging structural violence permeate the letters.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Desire for Agency**

"I like to do things for myself" frequently interrupts the flow of her thoughts. In these direct and clear assertions The Boss challenges the perceived incompetence of people oppressed by the label of intellectual disability. "I love to can. I would give them away to you. I know how to make apple butter. Strawberry shortcakes. I can mash them up and

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make them into toppings.” As in this passage, she describes frequently the meals she would like to cook for people. Though her life is so fully determined by others (in the name of safety) that she is not given the opportunity to participate in the preparation of her own meals she stubbornly refuses to accept the oppression around her and instructs others to do the same. “Do what things are best for you, to heck with them!” Demonstrating that she not only desires to be perceived as competent and capable herself but demands the same treatment for others. Both a commentary on the nature of large institutions and on the infantilization so common to the experiences of people oppressed by the label of intellectually disabled.

#### **4.3 *Theme 3: Desire to Progress and Grow***

Following high school, many individuals are immediately enrolled in a sheltered workshop. Despite the transitory quality implied by the institutional label of “vocational rehabilitation” most individuals remain inside these segregated space working on exploitative, meaningless work receiving less than minimum wage for the rest of their lives. Many states have come under criticism and have been sued for condoning such practices. Including the state where The Boss wrote these letters. Inside of these letters her demand to be allowed to grow is explicit, “I want to get my own business” she says and elaborates “I want to bring my work home and I can do half of it up there and the other half of it up here.”

#### **4.4 *Theme 4: Desire to Experience Intimacy and Love***

At the core of the letters written from the sheltered workshop to the world is a yearning to be loved and to be permitted to love. Academic literature on desire and disability reflects an environment steeped in fear and misconception, the legacy of eugenics ripples into the present. Perhaps the greatest aspect of moral exclusion pertaining to individuals oppressed by the label of intellectually disabled is the right to a sexual experience. Past research has noted examples of people in sheltered workshops holding hands or kissing suffering punishment such as isolation and removal of privileges (Gill, 2015; Kulick & Rydström, 2015). In residential facilities and in family homes, individuals are equally likely to face discrimination and repercussion for expressing their sexual desires (Winges-Yanez, 2014). If sexuality is expressed under these restrictive and unlikely conditions, it is likely to label the persons as deviant and dangerous (McRuer & Mollow, 2012).

Like a drum that sets a beat, the letters return to the yearning for love over and over again. She recognizes the beauty of love saying “He helps me to read and spell and do numbers and stuff. Things like that. He makes me feel strong...” Often, as if wanting to scream over the noise of over-protective justifications of the asexualization of people oppressed by the label of intellectual disability, her letters passionately plead for romantic love, imagining trips to the beach, going to the movies, and going dancing. Someone to hold hands with. “Something tells me and I did. I met someone.” With her words, The Boss sculpts someone we can almost imagine, someone almost real. These acts of radical

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resistance and exercise of the freedom of her imagination reveal that the Boss is a survivor of the dehumanizing effects of practices that desexualize.

#### **4.5 *Theme 5: Desire to Express Care and Love***

The final theme I will elevate from these letters is yearning to express care for others. Moral exclusion's counterpart is moral inclusion, the process that involves willingness to extend fairness to others, to allocate resources to them, and sacrifice on behalf of another's wellbeing (Opatow, 1990). In her letters, The Boss situates herself in an inclusionary context, speaking of her own responsibilities in caring for others. She says, "I want to understand where you guys are comin' from. I love everybody up here." She invites people to come talk to her with problems and offers to give jam she would make if she could was given opportunities to exercise self-determination. Offering guidance freely, she hesitates to offer support in a manner that might do injustice. "I can't tell you the secret to love. You have to find it out. That's the way I did." In this phrase she boldly asserts that love is possible for everyone. Loving is everyone's right. And everyone deserves to be loved.

### **5. Conclusion**

As one of the most stigmatized in society, people oppressed by the label of intellectually disabled are frequently not given the opportunity to engage in conversations around the process of moral exclusion and the experience of surviving immense structural violence. These letters, from a brilliant woman whose life has largely taken place within segregated institutions, reveal the complexity of survival within structurally violent contexts. Even within these exclusionary and unjust settings, the fire of activism burns creating a space in which to imagine a different world, a world that includes a supportive community, acceptance, the freedom to pursue one's passions, and love.

These letters serve as a reminder for community researchers and activists to take seriously the questions and possibilities tucked within the everyday narratives of those who are most intimately familiar with these systems of oppression. The analysis of these letters reveals provocative criticisms of human rights violations as well as awareness of the abuses in the structurally violent systems claiming to support her.

The Boss speaks of the walls that need to be literally torn down and the windows that should invite the world to peer in. She yearns to be loved and to have the opportunity to love. Even if her physical surroundings do not allow for her sexual rights to be recognized, she resists in her imagination creating sensually evocative stories telling of a love she dreams of. Finally, she openly expresses frustration for being viewed as incompetent, and calls to other to do the same. These interpretations grapple with and expand on our understanding of the complex environment and the agents surrounding her who promote morally exclusionary practices.

In the same space where The Boss has illuminated her experiences of moral exclusion, showing us as community researchers and activists invested in social justice the very

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textures of the scaffolding that supports structural violence, she expresses her desires for social change, imploring all of us to find the same capacity to imagine and enact a just world filled with open spaces, windows, love, affection, and stubborn resistance toward stigmatizing expectations. With this understanding of the mechanics of structural violence, of the way these macrosocial forces unfold within a life, the uncomfortable concerns the article began with continue to linger, perhaps serving for community psychology as the “messy example” of uncomfortable reflexivity that Wanda Pillow (2003) refers to, an example that does “not seek a comfortable, transcendent end-point but leaves us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” (p. 193).

I am no closer to ridding myself of these nagging concerns than I was earlier. Knowing this, I want to end with questions that acknowledge the lack of ending to a multivoiced article such as this. I want to ask where the line is between exploitation and activism when the perceived power differential is great? Can academia, including community psychology, ever truly enact socially just practices when implicit in the very definition of academia is privilege and prestige? Can we join our voices with the voices of those designated as Other without reinforcing structural violence by reappropriation? These are not questions that are intended to point fingers or apportion blame. Perhaps these questions are closer to a letter written to the world with that hopes that it may inspire collaborative dreaming of radical possibilities of inclusion.

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