

Storytelling and Activism within the Death Penalty Abolition Movement

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by

Annie Hallman
Bachelor of Science
University of North Alabama, 2000

Director: Debra Lattanzi Shutika, Professor
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to the death row exonerees, murder victims' family members, family members of people who are on death row and family members of people who have been executed who tirelessly advocate for death penalty abolition and continue to share their personal experiences to bring awareness to the atrocities that capital punishment can inflict on individuals and their loved ones.

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ABSTRACT

STORYTELLING AND ACTIVISM WITHIN THE DEATH PENALTY ABOLITION MOVEMENT

Annie Hallman, M.A.

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Dr. Debra Lattanzi Shutika

This thesis explores personal experience narratives as social practice within the death penalty abolition movement, focusing on the relationship established between the storyteller and the listener through the creation and performance of stories that lead to activism. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, I conducted a literature search, incorporated discussions with murder victims' family members and activists while participating in an anti-death penalty demonstration, and analyzed an oral performance and a memoir written from the perspective of an exonerated woman. I present and analyze the stories and voices of these survivors, advocates, and activists in an attempt to uncover how they use personal narrative to promote awareness and attain understanding, connection, and a shared sense of responsibility to social justice.

INTRODUCTION

In the following chapters, I explore personal experience narratives as social practice within the death penalty abolition movement, focusing on the relationship established between the storyteller and the listener through the creation and performance of stories that lead to activism. The telling of one's own story is a central aspect of movement-building in most contemporary social justice campaigns and is an important cultural practice within the abolition community (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 1).

Since the 1976 Supreme Court ruling *Gregg v. Georgia* (428 U.S. 153), which reinstated the practice of capital punishment in the U.S. after a four-year moratorium, 1,456 executions have been carried out in various forms: lethal injection, electrocution, gas chamber, hanging, and firing squad. Texas holds the record for the highest number of executions, at 542, according to the Death Penalty Information Center website (2017). Virginia and Oklahoma follow, at 113 and 112 respectively. Regionally, the South executed 1,188 individuals, 82% of the total since 1976. Since 1973, 159 people have been exonerated from death row in the U.S.

There are numerous sources for statistical representation of the U.S. prison population, their offenses, arrest records, and demographics. These statistics, while valid forms of reporting and research within traditional quantitative methodology, lack

the context that personal testimony lends to the understanding of human experience and behavior (Parrot and Cummings 2006, 17). In some cases, personal accounts may be the only information that describes the conditions faced by those who are incarcerated in a way that places them in a more historical, social, and political context (16). With little reporting and first-hand accounts of the experiences people endure in prison, especially on death row, stories of personal experience provide a rare and valuable narrative of death row victims' and survivors' perspectives.

There is no number of statistical data collected that would be more contextually beneficial for understanding the experiences of those directly affected by the death penalty than the accounts of the victims and survivors themselves. When we give the numbers a story and a name, we begin to relate to and humanize the people who are so often dehumanized by the criminal justice system, thus bridging the gap between us and them. Through their stories, exonerees, murder victims' family members, and death row family members are able to offer the listener, the public, an intimate view of their life before, during, and after incarceration or execution. No longer just a statistic, these people use narratives to give a humanized, personal perspective on the atrocities that capital punishment can inflict on individuals and their loved ones.

Methodology

This thesis includes interactions and stories gathered while participating in "Starvin' for Justice," an annual Fast and Vigil to Abolish the Death Penalty organized by the Abolitionist Action Committee in Washington, D.C., an event I have participated in for almost a decade. I discuss conversations with Bill Pelke, one of the founding members of the Fast and Vigil; "Mary," participating for the third time in the Fast and

Vigil and an event emcee; and “Catherine,” who was participating in the protest for the first time. In addition, I include a personal experience narrative told by a murder victim’s family member, Art Laffin, recorded at the 2012 Fast and Vigil, and a memoir written from the perspective of an exonerated woman, Sunny Jacobs, about her experience on death row. While I have used pseudonyms for the two Fast and Vigil participants, “Mary” and “Catherine,” I refer to Bill, Art, and Sunny, by their real names, since they publically share their stories and are well-known figures within the death penalty abolition movement. These storytellers’ public status within the movement makes their personal narratives well known. The stories I reference in the following pages were told publically and/or written in a published memoir and meant to be associated with the identities of the tellers. My approach allowed for the utilization of multidisciplinary qualitative research methods to gain a better contextual understanding of the lived experiences of those directly affected by the death penalty in the U.S. and how the sharing of their experiences has contributed to movement building and activism.

As an insider and participant in the Fast and Vigil and the death penalty abolition movement more broadly, I also leverage my own understanding and cultural knowledge to help identify norms of interpretation within the activist community I will be discussing. “One of the advantages of studying one’s own culture,” writes Muriel Saville-Troike, “and attempting to make explicit the systems of understanding which are implicit, is that ethnographers are able to use themselves as sources of information and interpretation” (2002, 89). My hope is that my combined participation as an

audience member, community member, and academic/ethnographer, will allow me to offer a deeper insight into some of the more difficult aspects of meaning that may not have been as apparent if I were an outsider watching, listening, and participating for the first time.

As a folklorist, I have adopted a multidisciplinary approach to my research from the beginning of my graduate career, drawing on perspectives from literature, criminology, sociology, and women's studies, to name a few. Together, these approaches push the boundaries of the discipline of folklore by creating a wider lens through which to study and analyze narratives as they relate to activism and human rights claims. My multidisciplinary training as well as my personal experience in the abolition movement has led to my interest in the unique relationship of the performer/teller and the audience/listener. I am also interested in the ways personal narratives shape collective cultural ideas, practice, and community through performance and creative works as vehicles of resistance. Joseph Davis explains, "The analysis of narrative...illuminates core features of identity-building and meaning-making in social activism" (2002, 4). In the death penalty abolition movement, narrative analysis expands the lens that is so often used to understand the death penalty and highlights the role that storytellers play in the "meaning-making" of abolition activism.

In chapter two, I introduce the five individuals within the death penalty abolition movement—including activists, murder victims' family members, and an exoneree—whose stories and voices are the focus of my analysis. Chapter three reveals the significance and sociopolitical implications of the narratives shared by those directly

affected by the death penalty and how their personal accounts provide a counternarrative and counterperformance to the widespread understanding that the criminal justice system is both just and fair. In Chapter four, I explore the role of empathy, embodiment, and collective consciousness as they emerge in response to the public performance of personal narratives in the abolition movement. I conclude by discussing how ethnographic research and the study of personal narrative and performance through creative outlets, such as memoirs, plays, music and other creative works, can play an important role in the broader struggle for justice in the U.S.

STORIES AND VOICES OF ABOLITION

Bill Pelke's Story

In 1985, Bill Pelke's seventy-eight-year-old grandmother, Ruth Pelke, let a group of teenage girls into her home. The girls claimed that they wanted to hear her teach Bible stories, something she was known for doing in her neighborhood. Instead, the girls robbed her and she was stabbed to death. Paula Cooper, a fifteen-year-old who went to school near Bill's grandmother's house, was sentenced to die for the murder of Ruth Pelke.

One night when Bill was sitting in his crane at work, he began to think about Paula Cooper and remembered her grandfather being kicked out of the courtroom for wailing, "They're going to kill my baby! They're going to kill my baby!" Paula's grandfather was led past Bill with tears streaming down his cheeks. Bill then had a vision of his grandmother, whom he calls "Nana," with tears streaming down her cheeks, too. He said that Nana's tears would not be for her own pain, but tears of love and compassion for Paula Cooper and her family. Bill felt that his Nana's faith and belief in Jesus would have led her to forgive Paula and that she wouldn't want Paula to be killed for killing her. Bill met with Paula's grandfather who shared pictures of Paula and her sister growing up. He also learned of the horrible abuse Paula suffered as a child at the hands of her mother and stepfather. Bill found compassion for the girl who murdered his

Nana. He knew that his grandmother would have wanted someone from her family to speak out against Paula Cooper being on death row and speak up about forgiveness.

Since that night when Bill had his epiphany in the crane, he has devoted his life to helping Paula Cooper and speaking out against the death penalty. Bill's compassion for Paula wasn't shared by his parents and some of his family members, but did lead to his appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show and recognition by Pope John Paul II, who urged clemency for the then eighteen-year-old Paula Cooper and other juveniles on death row. Bill's diligence led the Supreme Court of Indiana to set aside Paula Cooper's death sentence in 1989, commuting it to a 60-year prison term. Paula Cooper was set free in June of 2013 due to an Indiana law dictating that offenders earn one day off their sentence for each day served with good behavior. Sadly, Paula took her own life nearly two years after her release.

A Personal Journey

The first time I heard Bill Pelke's story about his Nana and his personal journey of healing through the power of forgiving Paula Cooper, I was attending my first annual Fast and Vigil to Abolish the Death Penalty in Washington, D.C. I sat on the sidewalk in the blistering sun in front of the U.S. Supreme Court and felt hot tears stream down and sting my sunburned face as I was moved by the unwavering love and compassion this man had for the person who murdered his beloved grandmother. I thought if Bill Pelke could forgive Paula Cooper, so could I. The hunger I had felt from fasting on my way over to join the others for the "teach-in" on the sidewalk had subsided as I heard story after story similar to Bill's.

It was nine years ago that I was asked face to face, for the first time, if I “believed” in the death penalty. I had never really given it much thought up to that point and maybe it was because I had been so far removed from the effects of capital punishment. At that moment, when I was asked the question about my belief in the death penalty, I realized I really had none. My response was to educate myself and form some kind of opinion on capital punishment. Although it was easy to defend the innocent who were sentenced to die for something they didn’t do, I struggled with my emotions and wrapping my head around being able to forgive the “unforgivable” crimes.

It wasn’t until I attended my first Fast and Vigil to Abolish the Death Penalty in Washington, D.C. that I met and heard personal accounts of several death row exonerees, murder victims’ family members, family members of people who were on death row and family members of people who had been executed. At that point I felt that I had personally known several people who were directly affected by the death penalty. I had never felt so moved and compelled to action as I did after attending that first Fast and Vigil and hearing story after story about the atrocities people are subjected to in the wake of death sentencing and executions. I heard stories about families of those on death row having to endure multiple execution dates that are called off only minutes before their loved one is put to death. Others told of the isolation death row inmates feel in solitary confinement, without any physical contact with another human being for years at a time, and living in tiny cells that can be touched on both sides by just reaching out your arms. After hearing these stories and many more, I formed an opinion and became an activist against the death penalty.

Stories like those I heard at my first Fast and Vigil and continue to hear year after year have not only led to my participation as an activist, but have also influenced my academic work. In the following chapters, I explore personal experience narratives as social practice within the death penalty abolition movement, focusing on the relationship established between the storyteller/performer and the listener/audience through the creation and performance of stories that lead to activism.

Stories “create experiences for and request certain responses from their audience,” writes Davis (2002, 12). There are many ways to study the dynamics of collective action. However, personal experience narratives offer a means to study a collective, shared identity within a cultural community of activists by focusing on what Glenn Fine refers to as “bundles of stories” (2002, 244). My goal in identifying the importance of the relationship between the teller and listener is to explain why personal experience narratives may be the most important and useful tool for fighting state-sanctioned killing through capital punishment in the U.S.

Murder Victims’ Families, Activists and the Exonerated

In the following chapters, you will be introduced to more stories and voices of those directly affected by the death penalty and activists who have been drawn to the abolition movement via the stories shared by those affected. Mary, a pseudonym given to a woman who has been involved in the abolition movement for several years, was a three-time participant in the Fast and Vigil when our discussion took place. Catherine, a pseudonym given to another woman I met and talked to at the Fast and Vigil, was a graduate student and attending the event for the first time. Mary and Catherine are just two of the hundreds of people who have participated in the Fast and Vigil during its 24-

year history, but their perspectives and experiences are similar to many abolitionists I have spoken to over the last several years who have felt compelled to action after hearing stories of those who have been directly affected by the death penalty in the U.S.

“Starvin’ for Justice”

I opened with Bill Pelke’s story because it was the first one that I heard when I attended the Fast and Vigil for the first time in 2009. Bill and two other death penalty abolitionists, Marietta Jeager-Lane and Rick Halperin, started the Fast and Vigil in 1994. The event takes place between June 29th and July 2nd each year to commemorate the dates of two prominent U.S. Supreme Court death penalty rulings. June 29th marks the anniversary of *Furman v. Georgia* (408 U.S. 238), the 1972 decision in which the Supreme Court found the death penalty to be “arbitrary and capricious.” This ruling instated a type of de facto moratorium on capital punishment in the U.S. that continued for four years while states were required to rewrite their death penalty laws. July 2nd is the anniversary of *Gregg v. Georgia* (428 U.S. 153), the 1976 Supreme Court decision that allowed the resumption of executions in the U.S. Since 1994, Starvin’ for Justice, the nickname given to the Fast and Vigil by its participants, has become an annual ritual of embodied awareness and nonviolent protest in direct proximity to the governing body responsible for allowing executions in the U.S. since 1976.

For over twenty years, abolitionists have gathered at the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court to starve themselves for four days, starting at midnight on June 29th and ending with a meal shared together in front of the Court at midnight on July 3rd. The Fast and Vigil is a unified ritual to effect change and increase awareness of a social movement through fasting and public outreach. The event provides a space and place for

abolitionists to meet, fast, and maintain a presence in front of the Supreme Court for those four symbolic days while educating the public on alternatives to the death penalty.

While fasting is not required for all four days, participants do refrain from eating while holding vigil in front of the Court out of respect for those who have chosen to not eat until the last night of the Fast and Vigil. The practice of fasting as a form of self-sacrifice to protest an injustice has been utilized by many cultures and can be traced back to medieval Celtic and ancient Hindu traditions. The medieval Celtic tradition, later reintroduced in the form of the modern Irish republican hunger strike, was a custom of *Senchus Mor*, the civil code of the oral Brehon Law system that governed much of pre-Christian Ireland (Beresford, 7). The ritual fast known as *troscad* was an accepted legal method of redressing a grievance available to all members of the Celtic society and was especially effective as a means for a person of lesser social status to compel justice from a person of higher social status (7). This medieval Irish practice bears a close resemblance to the ancient Hindu custom of “sitting dharna” or “sitting down to die by hunger strike,” where, just as in *Senchus Mor*, those wronged would fast until they were vindicated (8). Although fasting or “sitting dharna” was a well-known and utilized custom in India, it was Gandhi who attracted the most attention with his fast to protest colonial rule in his country. Women also took full advantage of the humanitarian sympathy surrounding self-sacrifice through starving and began to utilize the practice in the suffragette movement in Britain, Ireland, and the U.S. (Vernon, 60).

Although the annual Fast and Vigil in D.C. may have not been directly influenced by ancient and historical customs of hunger striking and ritual fasting, there are symbolic

similarities to the ancient practices of *troscad* and “sitting dharna.” Much like the ancient traditions, the annual Fast and Vigil is held on the steps of the highest court in the land, the threshold of the institution responsible for the laws and decisions surrounding the death penalty in the U.S. Also similar is the idea of public shaming of those responsible for perpetuating the practice of capital punishment by asserting a visible presence of self-inflicted suffering to invoke blame upon the governing authority.

Fast and Vigil participants rotate between holding anti-death penalty signs and handing out educational literature about the common myths surrounding the death penalty to the thousands of people from all over the world who walk past the Court and the demonstration. There are opportunities for those who pass by to take action, sign petitions, and learn more about abolition movements in their home states. Every night from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, passers-by and participants in the Fast and Vigil gather in front of the steps to hear those who have been directly affected by the death penalty step up to a microphone and share their stories with the public.

Not wanting to associate themselves with any particular organization in order to maintain a non-hierarchical event that is people-led as opposed to organization-led, the three founding members of the group decided to call themselves the Abolitionist Action Committee (ACC), “an ad-hoc group of individuals committed to highly visible and effective public education for alternatives to the death penalty through nonviolent direct action” according to the ACC website. The name and grassroots orientation still apply over twenty years later. Four years from when it began with just a handful of abolitionists, more than 150 people attended the event in 1998; since then, the Fast and

Vigil has continued to maintain an average of seventy-five people from across the U.S. and around the world attending in person every year. Many of those who cannot be there in person fast in solidarity with those at the Court, including several death row inmates.

Art Laffin

Art Laffin is an annual speaker at the Fast and Vigil, as well as the organizer of the meal that is prepared and served in front of the Supreme Court to break the fast on the last night of the event. He, along with Bill Pelke, is a member of the Journey of Hope, an organization founded by murder victims' family members who travel the world sharing their stories of healing through the power of forgiveness and speak out against the death penalty and systematic state violence. Art's brother was murdered by a mentally ill man in 1999 at the homeless shelter he directed in Connecticut. Art, an organizer, writer, and speaker in the faith-based movement for peace and justice for over twenty years, has long worked against the death penalty, even before his brother's murder. Art was arrested in 1997, two years before his brother's death, for taking part in an act of civil disobedience by unfurling a "Stop Executions" banner across the upper steps of the Supreme Court, which is off limits for any type of political protest or demonstrations. Since 1999, Art has shared his personal story at the Fast and Vigil as well as other marches and demonstrations across the country and is a Catholic Worker at the Dorothy Day House in Washington, D.C.

I chose to include Art's performance to illustrate how narrative scholars and folklorists can analyze storytelling to not only describe the structure of the event and community in which the performance takes place, but also to explain the relationship between genre and the purpose of the performance, the way in which the speaker chooses

to share and tell his story, as well as the different ways in which the participants view the purpose or function of the telling and listening of the story may hold for them as individuals and as a community of practice.

Sonia “Sunny” Jacobs

Sunny Jacobs was a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two when she and her partner, Jesse Tafero, were wrongfully sentenced to death in Florida for the murder of two police officers. Sunny and Jesse both entered the confinement of death row in 1976 and Sunny was the only one left alive seventeen years later when she was finally freed. Sunny spent five years in solitary confinement living in a cell that was the width of her arm-span. She had little contact with her family, lawyers, prison staff, and other inmates. Her only means of communication were the life-affirming letters between herself and Jesse offering love, strength, and conviction that truth would prevail and they would join their families once again. Sunny’s hope for reconciliation did not waiver, even in the wake of falsified testimonies and evidence that the state had concealed the true murderer’s confession. In 1981 her sentence was reduced to life and she was mainstreamed into the community of other incarcerated women. Sunny was exonerated in 1992, two years after Jesse was killed in a botched execution that caused international outrage. While in prison, Sunny lost her parents in a plane crash, leading to more isolation and estrangement from her children who had been in their custody. After spending seventeen years of her life wrongfully confined and condemned, Sunny entered into a world much different than the one she knew in 1976. Sunny, now an anti-death penalty activist and a member of the Journey of Hope, has spent the last twenty-five years

sharing her and Jesse's story of injustice via speaking events, a play, and a memoir she published in 2008.

In the following chapter, I present and analyze the stories and voices of these survivors, advocates, and activists in an attempt to uncover how personal narrative is used to promote awareness and attain understanding, connection, and a shared sense of responsibility to social justice.

DEFIANCE AND RESISTANCE

The Significance of Sunny's Story

Sonia “Sunny” Jacobs’ memoir, *Stolen Time: One Woman’s Inspiring Story as an Innocent Condemned to Death* (2008), is one of only two personal narratives published by female exonerees from the U.S. At the time of her incarceration Sunny was the only woman on death row in Florida and she was the only woman to be exonerated in the U.S. at the time of her release in 1992. According to Joanne Belknap, “women’s smaller proportion of prisoners (about 5 to 9 percent) has resulted in institutionalized sexism” (1996, 189). Unequal treatment of the smaller number of women on death row is usually “justified” by prisons that claim “it is not economically feasible to provide programs and facilities to women inmates that are comparable to the men’s privileges” (George 1998, 16). Sunny’s story of her isolation and substandard living conditions paint a picture of the inhumane treatment she had to endure solely on the basis of her being a woman on death row. Sunny and her story were also portrayed in *The Exonerated*, an award-winning play and 2005 made-for-TV movie starring Susan Sarandon as Jacobs.

Sunny uses her memoir to narrate the story of how both she and her partner, Jesse, fell victim to an unjust and unequal criminal justice system; her story becomes not only a memorial to Jesse, who was executed two years before Sunny’s release, but also a rallying cry for activism against capital punishment. Though Sunny and Jesse were convicted of the same crime, the murder of two police officers, their experiences and

conditions on death row were anything but equal. Sunny, the only woman on death row in Florida at the time, was subjected to human rights violations in a uniquely gendered way.

In a penal system conceived and implemented for the incarceration of men, women have long endured substandard conditions to those of men and their voices are rarely heard, even by prison reformers. Sunny's memoir not only tells the story of her own experience, but weaves the stories and experiences of her fellow prisoners to give a voice to the women kept invisible, silent, and isolated inside prison. According to Robin Levi and Ayelet Waldman, women "are often mentioned as an afterthought, if at all" in the discourse on penal policy, even though today women are the fastest growing population in U.S. prisons (2011, 12). Looking back, and remembering with quips of humor, Sunny addresses the irony of the location that she would be sent to better comply with the conditions of the federal court order she won to gain more equitable rights as men on death row: "It was called Broward Correctional Institution for Women although it was originally built for men, complete with urinals" (Jacobs 2008, 138). Because there were no facilities specifically suitable for a woman serving a death sentence at BCI, Sunny was placed in a single, solitary cell in the medical ward.

Women often face particular challenges in prison because they are the minority in a system designed for men (Levi and Waldman 2011, 18). For example, the prison healthcare system mandates shackling during transportation to and from the hospital. Because the mandate was made on the basis of transporting men, it does not account for the horrific conditions this regulation imposes on a woman in the late stages of active

labor (Levi and Waldman 2011, 18; Sussman 2009, 477). Sunny describes the deplorable conditions for pregnant women she witnessed while confined in the medical ward:

Normally, the woman spent the majority of the ninth month there. When they brought Bridgette in, handcuffed and shackled and nine months pregnant, I thought it was curious. When they left her there handcuffed and shackled all night, I thought it was cruel. If it weren't for the nurse, a nice woman, Ms. Perdy, who used to talk to me at night, Bridgette would have remained that way indefinitely. (Jacobs 2008, 167)

Another challenge many women experience in prison, and especially on death row, is the difficulty in maintaining family relationships. Levi and Waldman note that “eighty percent of women in prison in the United States are the primary caretakers of children, but women’s facilities are few and far between, and are often located far from families and communities” (2011, 19). This usually affects women in prison more than men because “incarcerated women are far more likely than incarcerated men to be the emotional and financial providers for children” (Belknap 1996, 202). Women who are incarcerated often have their children cared for by relatives, friends, or state foster homes, leading to justifiable worry that it will be difficult or impossible to regain custody when they are released from prison (204).

Sunny’s worry about her children, their welfare, and the possible loss of her parental rights is expressed as a constant feeling of helplessness and despair that tortures her throughout her incarceration. As the social workers were physically separating

Sunny from her children, she describes the initial panic of not being able to provide for her nursing baby:

The man took Tina. She tried to crawl away over his shoulder, resisting his grasp. My throat closed up and tears filled my eyes as my breasts began to ache at the sound of her distress. I had been nursing her since shortly after her birth. She was just ten months old now and I realized that she would be separated from her food. "Oh, wait!" I said as the door closed behind them. "I have to feed her. She can't use a bottle. She's nursing!"(Jacobs 2008, 30)

Sunny began a ritual the first night of incarceration that she continued for about a year to help her feel connected to her baby and give her some of the satisfaction of providing for her child even if only in a very symbolic way. After finding a small bowl she cleaned to express her breast milk, she couldn't dispose of it when she had finished and explains how she sat and wondered what to do with it:

It was sacred, the food my body had made for my child. I couldn't just throw it in the sink or in that horrible toilet. It was my child's food! How would she eat? I agonized over the thought for a few moments, then raised the bowl to my own lips. I would drink it myself, and that way when this was over I would still have milk for her. I drank and I was comforted, knowing that I had done this thing for my child. (38)

It wasn't until about a year after being on death row and being disappointed when the true murderer retracted a confession that could have helped set her and Jesse free that Sunny decided to let her milk go, explaining that her daughter didn't need her anymore

“in that way” and that it was for the best (114). A better understanding of the violations experienced by women in prison, as expressed through personal narratives like Sunny’s, can help to challenge the inhumane and unequal conditions therein and create effective policies that account for gender disparities (Parrot and Cummings 2006, 21). While Sunny’s personal experience does not account for the experiences of all women on death row and in prison, it is one voice and one step closer to understanding.

As a survivor and victim of wrongful condemnation, the exoneree’s experience carries a certain authority that justly positions him or her as a strong voice to speak out against the death penalty. Exonerees’ personal narratives and testimonies help to heal and overcome a harmful tragedy, and also bear witness to the dark and inhumane treatment of people who are incarcerated, isolated, and silenced within the criminal justice system.

The sentimental energy and awareness of the relationship between the storyteller and the listener, or the reader in the case of Sunny’s memoir, compels personal identification and can even elicit action (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 264). It was Sunny’s story, as portrayed in *The Exonerated*, that influenced Illinois Governor George Ryan to grant a mass commutation of death row inmates three days before leaving office in 2002 (258). Sunny has also played her own role in the play and travels with her husband, Peter Pringle, a death row exoneree from Ireland, as they speak out against the death penalty and share their stories of survival.

Sunny assumed her role as a witness and activist almost immediately after she was freed in 1992. At the end of her book, she describes becoming part of the abolition movement community:

From the very first, I had been adopted by the anti-death-penalty movement—sort of like the poster child...Micki [a childhood friend who aided in her release] and I went to Indiana to the Journey of Hope from Violence to Healing. That was great for me because I got to meet some of the other people who had been wrongfully sentenced to death. I remained a member of the Journey of Hope—I liked that theme and it meshed with what I was trying to do myself. The work that had begun in my death row cell, which I had expanded into my everyday life in prison through yoga, meditation and prayer, now became a way of life and a paradigm for living in this world. (Jacobs 2008, 399)

Sunny's memoir is a testament to the strength and determination of the human will to survive some of the most inhumane conditions bestowed unjustly by the criminal justice system in the U.S. Sunny, the only woman sentenced to death row in Florida at the time of her incarceration, was subjected to violations in a unique way that even further discriminated against her and abused her basic human rights. Her story is a shared narrative of the people and lives she met along her own journey of hope.

Physically winning the victory of their freedom, exonerees like Sunny are better positioned than current death row inmates to share their stories without the constraints, constant surveillance and scrutiny of the prison system. According to Schaffer and Smith, "the State can and does regulate personal storytelling as part of punishment"

(2004, 183). This type of constraint on a prisoner's ability to be heard makes it difficult to create a first-hand account of their experiences without the filter of the very institution that they may be complaining about or hold grievances against. This type of monitoring makes stories like the ones exonerees and death row family members tell even more valuable in lieu of actual incarcerated voices. Their personal accounts help bridge gaps in the official forms of quantitative reporting and data gathering, given that state regulations control what kinds of access activists have to inmates and their stories as well as when inmates can write, to whom and the content (183). Through her story, Sunny offers the reader, the public, an intimate view of her life before, during, and after her incarceration. No longer just a statistic, Sunny is able to use her narrative to present a humanized, personal perspective on the atrocities that capital punishment can inflict on individuals and their loved ones.

Telling "Untellable" Stories

The personal stories that are told in memoirs like Sunny's, as well as those told at the Fast and Vigil, serve as a counternarrative to the popular discourse that is currently upheld by U.S. law and often portrayed in mainstream media. The Fast and Vigil event in D.C. itself is an action and counterperformance, a political and ideological demonstration against a systemic and government-driven narrative supporting state killing as means to redress the crime of murder. Amy Shuman explains that "storytelling as subversive often pit[s] the narratives told in everyday life (the repressed voice of the oppressed people) against the dominant narratives of histories" (2010, 9). In these human rights claims, personal life stories as histories of oppressed people act as counternarratives that may undermine the rhetoric of those in power (10). These narratives serve as a

counterhegemonic tool in challenging social inequality and forms of domination that exist within the sociopolitical discourse as well as between the public and the dominant hegemony. In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Michael Jackson argues that storytelling in such instances is “a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances” (2002, 15). Charles Briggs asserts that the ability to “appreciate the interpretive and poetic sophistication of the members of dominated groups” is a crucial step in the study of narrative as verbal art (1988, 375). Briggs maintains that “verbal art provides one of the central ways that voices of resistance and persistence can be clearly, if often, articulated” (376).

When storytellers share their personal experiences, they are “reconceptualizing the categories” of their lives (Shuman 2010, 15). The ways in which a person tells their story can affect whether their claims are accepted as “normal” or are criticized as “immoral.” Their listeners could potentially characterize them as “victims” or as “willing participants” within the political context in which the story is situated (15). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith discuss some of the more complicated problems with provoking outrage or sympathy about human rights violations in the U.S. as they relate to prisoners’ rights. They believe it is partly due to the U.S.’s status as a global superpower. Not only does the U.S. not want to be seen as a violator of the very human rights they work to “protect” in other nations, but prisoners in the U.S. are also perceived to be found “guilty” by a “just” system that marks them outside the domain of human rights.

The dominant hegemony of the judicial discourse in the U.S. is an obstacle to what Shuman refers to as the “tellability” of trauma narratives such as the ones that

exonerees, murder victims' family members, and death row family members share with the public to help these survivors make sense of their experiences and make their memories more manageable as they are recounted. The negotiation of tellability, or noteworthiness, is an important concept when considering how one's story of trauma and injustice may or may not be accepted. Stories about things that should not happen, such as Sunny's story of a young woman who loses her children, partner and parents as a result of her wrongful incarceration, pose a problem for those who talk about tragedies and pose a counternarrative to the larger, public discourse. In fact, the "untellability" of such stories, Shuman states, "involves a lack of recognition of the category, a 'this kind of thing doesn't happen' response" that poses a problem for these types of narratives (19). Shuman claims, "The tellability of these trauma narratives is compromised by the unacceptability of the events" (20). The stories of death row exonerees directly counter the dominant belief in the effectiveness of the judicial system to administer true and just law based on the compilation and presentation of "facts" for guilt or innocence to be decided upon. To believe the exonerees' stories of injustice is to admit that the system is flawed, that there is indeed a counternarrative to the dominant discourse.

However, through the telling of these "untellable" stories, a storyteller can accomplish several things. A new scenario can be created by recategorizing an event by countering the way in which a story is understood or known in the dominant discourse (22). In her memoir, Sunny not only relates the story of her experience on death row, but also shares the narratives of her childhood, family and relationships as she traces her steps, going over her ground again, "reworking reality to render it more bearable"

(Jackson 2002, 245). Jackson explains the retelling and remembering of personal accounts as a “way we gain some purchase over events that confounded us, humbled us, and left us helpless” (245). In the acknowledgements section, Sunny describes her book as a reconstruction of a shattered life from which she restored herself.

According to Fiona Ross, a survivor’s testimony can be described as a “ritual of healing” that allows an individual to reintegrate a “painful experience into the self (thereby becoming whole) and makes a public statement about harms inflicted, thereby serving both to record harm and to denounce those who inflicted it” (Ross 2003, 78). Through her personal narrative, Sunny not only records, announces and denounces the harm inflicted on her and Jesse, she also denounces the criminal justice system that failed them, their families, and the murdered police officers’ families and memories.

Sunny shares her story, fragmented and nonlinear, with narratives of life before, during, and after her incarceration interwoven so as to better understand her “whole life” in context. Much like the structure of oral traditions, beginning in the middle of a story mimics the way human memory recalls a past event. Sunny describes a childhood filled with emotional neglect, anxiety, sexual abuse, and lack of self-worth while recounting the events leading up to the tragic incident that changed her life forever and the story of survival and overcoming a list of victimizations in a patriarchal society and criminal justice system.

Shuman explains, “The issue for these tellers is not just telling the story but telling it in a particular way or in a particular situation” (2010, 22). A storyteller knowingly or unknowingly negotiates this kind of problem with the tactics or strategies

they use when trying to make stories more tellable, more accessible, or, in Sunny's case, more bearable, to an audience and to themselves. Is the story effective? Can people relate, empathize, categorize? Only through the telling of untellable stories can the tellers create a counternarrative that may invoke empathy in listeners willing to acknowledge the "truthfulness" of a story and "accept an ethical responsibility to both the story and the teller" to believe and respond positively (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 6).

Personal Accounts as Counterperformance

The U.S.'s approach to state killing has transformed from a very public display of death to the more hidden and "invisible" way in which capital punishment is carried out today (Ryan 2012). This historical change is described by sociologist Katy Ryan as a shift from a publicly engaged stage to a "theatre for the performance of society's founding political myths" (2012, 5). The central myth that Ryan refers to is the myth of a more humane alternative to overt state violence (in which convicts are tortured on a rack, drawn and quartered, or beheaded in the town square) that positions the judicial and penal system as administrators of responsible punishment carried out through the medicalized performance of lethal injections (7). The myth hides the disjunction between those intentions of a more humane and "restorative" prison system and the actual brutalizing effect of the modern penitentiary. Ryan argues, "In the coerced performance of state killing, in the grotesque intimacy of the death chamber, the state reveals a social order" (7).

The personal accounts exonerees tell of the horrific and inhumane treatment they suffered and survived on death row directly contradict the political discourse surrounding what the prison system has come to represent in the U.S. Contradictions to civility, order,

and due process, such as botched executions, miscarriages of justice, and executions of women, the elderly, and the disabled jeopardize the “frame of responsible state action” (7).

Ryan also explains, “Enclosed within prison walls, state killing minimizes the chance of disturbance from unruly masses whose enthusiasm for blood might reflect poorly on the state or whose sympathies might be dangerously aroused for the condemned” (5). Michel Foucault explains the isolation and seclusion of those condemned to die as a result of the “disappearance of punishment as a spectacle.” This shift to a more invisible, medicalized theater of death was brought about in order to lessen public opinion that “the punishment ... equal[ed] the crime...to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murders, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration” ([1978] 1995, 8-9). Through the telling and sharing of personal narratives, the storytellers at the Fast and Vigil and exonerees who share their experiences make those hidden on death row visible; through a ritual of public testimony, they become sacred. Another function fulfilled by the storytellers’ narratives is the reversal of the victim’s and perpetrator’s roles which calls into question “a sovereign sphere...in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice and sacred life” (Agamben 1998, 83).

In most cases, executions receive little coverage in the news and most protest, if any, is moderate. However, there are some exceptions. For example, hundreds of people gathered outside a Georgia prison and the U.S. Supreme Court on September 21, 2011 to protest the execution of Troy Davis. More than half a million were convinced of his

innocence and signed petitions calling for clemency. Troy Davis's story was highly publicized by organizations like Amnesty International. Shared through the news and social media, his story starkly contradicted the dominant discourse of social order surrounding state killing in the U.S. The personal accounts of what is really going on behind bars and of lives that have been violated and destroyed by "social order" constitute a powerful counterperformance to the "political myth" that Ryan describes above. Similar to the argument laid out by Shari Stone-Mediatore, "storytelling can serve the public function...of resisting political indoctrination and maintaining responsible public debate" (2003, 10).

My research shows the power of personal narratives to create a counternarrative that needs to be heard regarding the justice system and those who are facing the ultimate punishment. The stories told by those affected by the death penalty in the U.S. are acts of defiance and resistance as they make visible the reality that the State is now the murderer and the "murderer" is now the victim of injustice.

RESPONSE AND ACTION

Empathy and Embodiment of Activism

One of the most well-attended events of the Fast and Vigil is the nightly “teach-in” where speakers get up in front of the Supreme Court and share their stories with event participants, passersby and those who stop to listen in. It was at my first teach-in that I heard Bill Pelke tell his story and several others like him get up and share their personal narratives of the pain and suffering that the death penalty had caused them and their loved ones. Mary, a three-time participant of the Fast and Vigil, has not been directly affected by the death penalty, but became an activist for abolition after meeting a woman on death row before her execution. Mary was a criminology student at that time and visited the woman for an interview as part of a course in her graduate program. Meeting the woman and hearing her story motivated Mary to join the movement for abolition:

Meeting her and hearing her story was the first time that I had really thought about what it must feel like to be incarcerated and knowing that you’re going to die. And also knowing that the system is unjust, and also claiming that you are innocent of the crime...and so when I just saw her, the level of fear, and frustration, and voicelessness that she seemed to have—that really pushed me into reconsidering anything that I had known about the death penalty and the assumptions that I had made and what it actually means in real life to people.

Mary describes her ability to relate to and feel empathy for the woman she met as a direct result of meeting her and listening to her story with claims of innocence and injustice. Personal loss in the most basic and tragic form presses into the consciousness of the listener, evoking a sense of empathic sentimentality to imagine another's pain, suffering or human identity (Ryan 2012, 263). Understanding the commonality of everyday lives in institutional settings helps to blur the distinction between those on the inside and those on the outside, "seeing oneself in the other and the other in oneself" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 179). Shuman explains, "A sympathetic response to another's situation (defined as willingness to share an interpretation of or feel compassion for another's plight) or empathy (defined as an attempt to experience the suffering of others) always creates a relationship between a storyteller and listeners" (2010, 8). By forming a relationship between the storyteller and the listener, "an individual's life story acquires a more-than-personal meaning" (8). Catherine Fosl states, "Such tales invite others to put themselves in the narrator's position, to enter an empathetic understanding that calls on shared humanity" (2008, 224). The sentimental energy and awareness of the relationship between the storyteller and the listener compels the listener to personally identify with the familiar, and can even elicit action such as joining a movement, as Mary describes above (264).

Catherine, a first-time participant in the Fast and Vigil, explains how she now feels more connected to the movement to abolish the death penalty through hearing those affected share their stories:

Each one has a story that connects them to the movement. Some have a more direct connection. I don't know anyone on death row, but now I know someone who has a child on death row or someone who was exonerated. So, knowing those people brought me into the circle. I can't deny being moved when hearing their story. It's emotional and you can feel their pain. I can't know what it is like to be on death row, but can sympathize with this person who told me their story.

By connecting with the people telling their personal narratives, Catherine is able to relate to and make a human connection with the polarizing and political issue of the death penalty. Schaffer and Smith discuss why sharing these types of narratives are imperative to advancing human rights claims: "As people meet together and tell stories, or read stories across cultures, they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering" (2004, 1).

Personal accounts give a face, a physical human body, to suffering and bring meaning to the "human" part of human rights. If a person can hear and relate to another, it builds empathy and community. Davis notes that the ability to form a bridge from story to action within an activist community depends on what narrative theorists call "narrativity" (2002, 16). The narrativity of a story is what enables a listener to form the connections required to understand the events and people featured in the story. "As a result, a listener can feel involved in events and care about those portrayed in or telling stories even when they are, in fact, very far from his or her own experience," Davis explains (16). This, argues Davis, is "a point of obvious importance to social movements"

(16). The narrativity of the stories Catherine hears enables her to form a relationship with the storytellers, their families, their loved ones on death row. She is able to “indirectly experience that person’s suffering...without enduring those tragedies” (8).

Mary describes how knowing those directly affected by the death penalty allows her to share their stories with people while she is outside on the sidewalk, handing out pamphlets, and engaging with the public at the Fast and Vigil:

If I were to share someone’s story I don’t know if it would be as effective, but there have been times when it has been effective. When I’ve had conversations with people who say things like, “What if it were your daughter who was murdered?” I can say, “Well I actually do know several people whose daughters have been murdered and the thing that has helped them most is not the punishment of the person who did it but their ability to see the justice system for what it lacks and to see our systems in general for what they lack...and to give them the ability and opportunity to recognize that there is another way you can think about this. And another way that is actually, in the long run, going to help us more is if we learn to forgive one another.” I think it is very important for people’s voices to be heard.

Davis explains, “Through identification and ‘cocreation’ of a story, the storyteller and reader/listener create a ‘we’ involving some degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity: told and retold, ‘my story’ becomes ‘our story’” (19). Thus a communicative relationship engages people via the storytelling process as social transaction (19). Mary may not have her own personal story to share, but she is able to recall and retell the

stories of those directly affected by capital punishment. By sharing these stories, Mary is participating in a cultural practice that's central to the activist community to which she belongs.

In *Other People's Stories*, Amy Shuman integrates multiple theoretical perspectives in a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach to explore what she refers to as the practice of "making meaning" from stories. She states that her goal is to "understand the promises of narrative, especially as those promises are produced by uses of allegory and entitlement, and to provide a critique of empathy" (2010, 4). Shuman questions how stories change when people share others' experiences and how the telling of other people's stories can provide a lens for viewing the use of personal narrative as an act of empathy (5). She states:

In listening to or even retelling other people's stories, narrators become witnesses to others' experiences, and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences...empathy is one way that understanding can travel back toward the experience to recover the distance stories create when they are far from experience. (5)

Shuman describes "the travels of stories" as a category of "tellability" (7). She explains, "Both storyability (what gets told) and tellability (who can tell it to whom) are constrained by how experience is categorized" (7). Mary may have heard a particular story at a teach-in at the Fast and Vigil, but when she shares it with others who may have no connection to the context in which the story was originally told, there is the possibility for recategorizing the experience depicted in the narrative. Shuman explains that "when

stories travel, they acquire new meanings and create new categorical possibilities that then travel back and make available new categories to the persons whose experiences were described” (8). Therefore, the sharing, telling and retelling of personal experience narratives constitute a vital social practice for activist communities. Though taken out of context, the retellings can be “used to create sympathy for the individual whose suffering is represented in the stories” and accrue value as they travel beyond their owners (8).

Mary says, “In any sort of movement about injustice, I think that you have to share the personal stories of people in order for others to understand the exact cost that is being made by not having a certain level of justice.” She also mentions that the stories give those who are fasting something to focus on during the continuous action across four days:

With all things that take up four full days, you need to have something to come together to kind of give you the energy to keep going on for those four days. So, like you often hear the line, “Their stories are the food when you can’t eat.” So you consume them, and consume them in a way that puts into perspective the limited amount of suffering you are doing while you are bearing witness to the suffering that is continuously going on with others.

Not only does Mary see the stories as a metaphorical sustenance in light of the real, physical hunger the participants experience, she also reflects on the importance of the narrative to remind the participants about the suffering of others:

That first year hearing some of the stories I heard just astounded me. And then to see people sharing one of the most intimate and trying times of their lives was

really a lot. It was a lot to take in and I think the juxtaposition of it with the suffering you are feeling from not eating, which is minimal in comparison, and realizing just how strongly you want to eat and how hungry you are...is very symbolic of the freedom people want to have.

Embodying activism in this case seems to allow participants to share the experience of someone they feel is oppressed. I argue that this act also allows the activists to remove themselves from their own status and comfort level in society to take on the “persona of the afflicted person” (Lambert 2003, 484). Fosl describes embodiment as a way to create a type of intimacy between the teller and listener of a story (2008, 221).

Collective Consciousness

Activists at the Fast and Vigil often describe their annual fasting experience as a time to come together in solidarity with abolitionists from all over the world and get “re-charged” to go back to their own communities and organizations to continue the fight against capital punishment. Bill, a founder of the Fast and Vigil, describes the experience as a way to stay motivated and connected:

After that first time it was a very rewarding experience and as the fast ended, I said I’ll come back every year until the death penalty is abolished and I haven’t missed a day in eighteen years...I think people go back to their cities and states more charged up. We’re the choir, but the choir needs to stay in tune. I think people will go back and think about Terri and her son on death row. The stories...they stick.

Glenn Fine argues that “internal social movement culture is basically a storied process; the continuous telling of stories helps to foster, sustain, and guide movement participation and allegiance” (2002, 20). Fosl explains that personal experience narratives are a “strategy employed by social justice activists seeking to prompt collective consciousness that can propel sociopolitical action” (2008, 219). When Bill says that the stories “stick,” he is referring to the way in which the stories remain a part of the activists’ collective memory. In this way, the narratives are a tool not only for reaching out to the public, but also to help keep the activist community members motivated and “in tune” with the overall collective consciousness of the movement.

In 2012, Art Laffin shared his personal experience narrative at the Fast and Vigil “teach-in” held in front of the Supreme Court. In a conversation with Mary, I asked several questions about how and why she became an activist against the death penalty and what she remembered or took away from Art’s story, as well as what purpose she believes these types of stories hold. Mary speaks of Art’s spirituality as a type of moral compass and a basis on which he structures his narrative. Mary says, “In terms of him speaking, some things always stick out to me about him. One is that he’s very spiritual and his spirituality is very connected to the way in which he tells the experiences he had in losing his brother.” Mary also mentions the way Art incorporates song into his performance:

I think another thing that always strikes me about Art is that he does the very Christian thing of making joyful noise... He’ll sing like old social justice sort of religious songs. He always does that, and even though he doesn’t necessarily sing

the best [laughs] he still does it, and it is very touching because you know that he is doing just that, making joyful noise as the Christians say.

When Art shares his story with the Fast and Vigil participants and passersby, he opens with a song. Art starts singing “Keep Your Eye On The Prize” as adapted by the civil rights movement in the 1960s. He begins with the familiar verse about Paul and Silas bound in jail and being freed by the salvation of God, but he starts to sing a couple of verses that he may have adapted for the event:

The only thing that we did right
Was to organize for life.
Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.
The only chain that we can stand
Is the chain of hand in hand.

Art then asks the crowd to join hands and walks over to a man standing near him and takes his hand. He continues to sing—“Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on.”—before ending the song and beginning his speech.

Mary notes that Art’s story remains factual yet relevant to what is going on at the time the story is told and how it relates to Art’s message:

His story is pretty much the same. I mean, he tells the story as a fact and then everything he talks about around the story may change every time he tells it and tends to have meaning to him at that moment in his life. I’m sure for some people having to relive and retell these stories over and over again, that probably does get old. But I think for him he uses it as a chance to witness to people both in a

religious and social justice sense. He's one of those people who seem to have adopted a certain level of forgiveness from the moment it happened, that he knew that his brother's murderer was mentally ill and the system was the thing that was wrong with him.

Art speaks of the importance of peacefully standing up for social justice before he begins the story of his brother's murder. Art then passes around photos of his brother and family for those in the crowd to look at while he shares his story.

The relationship between personal experience narrative and the function or purpose of the performance of these stories can be analyzed and interpreted in relation to the political context in which they are situated, the way in which the speaker chooses to share and tell his or her story, as well as the ways in which the participants view the purposes of the telling and listening of the stories may hold for them as individuals and as a community of social practice.

In "Performance," Richard Bauman introduces the idea that the scrutiny and evaluation of a performance by an audience are just as relevant to understanding and measuring Hymes's idea of communicative competence as how the performer chooses to perform. Bauman states, "Cultural performances tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community and tend to share a set of characteristic features" (2012, 46). Art Laffin's oral performance of his personal experience narrative can be defined as a cultural performance according to Bauman's definition and list of characteristic features. First, the event is scheduled and set up ahead of time as well as being temporally bounded by the teach-in time-block of 6pm-8pm every evening. The

event is also spatially bounded in the area between the sidewalk and the steps of the Supreme Court. Art's performance is programmed and situated within the structured scenario of a particular night's event that is a coordinated public occasion, open and free for anyone in the vicinity to attend and participate. Also, there is a heightened atmosphere for the occasion, given that it takes place during the four days that represent a space and time in which the death penalty was not practiced in the U.S. at the base of the very institution that decides the constitutional justification for its legal practice. Within this "socially defined situational [context]," as Bauman explains, communication is "situated, enacted, and rendered meaningful" (46).

The relationship between the genre, the setting, the participants, and the message form in this performance can also be explained with reference to the relationship of cultural performance to the rules of interaction and norms of interpretation reflected as a cultural practice. Within this cultural performance, the audience or participants in the speech community seem to have some concept of the background of the practice of the death penalty in the U.S. and are usually like-minded activists who are serious, sympathetic, and respectful to the storytellers. They understand the importance of the story in relationship to the topic, spatially, temporally and within the understanding of the purpose of the event itself. Participants remain nonviolent and follow all of the Supreme Court Police rules for demonstrating as listed and maintained in participation and consent forms signed at the beginning of the Fast and Vigil. They show physical support (hugging and hand shaking) after the speaker shares his story and some ask questions within the time given for questions and answers. During the oral performance itself, there is a quiet

calm and stillness that sets the stage for a story and experience meant to be heard and delivered unencumbered as much as possible, given that the event takes place in a public space near a busy street with traffic noise. After sharing his story, Art requests the crowd to continue action, asking them to remain steadfast and true to the cause of abolition, equality, social justice, and peace.

Stories like Art's are vivid examples of what Steven Caton describes as "both the creation of art and the production of social and political reality in the same act composition" (1993, 21). Art constructs and delivers his personal experience narrative not only to be communicated efficiently within a cultural performance, but also effectively as a political and ideological cultural practice and an act of resistance against institutionalized State killing. Caton says, "Artworks as practices are active agents, not just passive reagents, in history" (250). "Words," says Caton, "not only need to point to whatever the actors are presently engaged in verbally but also need to identify the participants and indicate their roles in the communicative act" (250). The relationship between the teller and listener provides a focus of analysis by which to understand and discover how personal narratives are used to promote awareness and attain understanding, connection, and a shared sense of responsibility to social justice. The intention, motivation, creativity, and accountability of the teller's performance all directly contribute to the way in which it establishes human connection and empathy among the audience that invokes the embodiment of action and fosters a collective consciousness in the death penalty abolition movement.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Originally published in 1989, Sandra D. Stahl's *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* is considered a classic in folklore and personal narrative studies as she first made the case for personal narrative as a folklore genre. Stahl's argument is based on her explanation of how tradition factors into narratives of personal experience. She suggests, "The listener enriches the text by listening and interprets the text by discovering tradition in the interpretive context" (11). Stahl's discussion of Dan Ben-Amos's and Robert Georges's ideas that there is no such "thing" as tradition or story because it is all an "analytical construct" on the part of the scholar leads to questions of just how much influence our study and deconstruction of narrative influence the meanings we, as scholars, appropriate when trying to understand or categorize a person's story. Stahl advocates that ethnographers consider the listener's point of view in the process of interpreting oral literary performance and consider biographical context as inseparable from text.

Since Stahl's groundbreaking work on literary folkloristics and the personal narrative, folklore scholars such as Amy Shuman and Elaine Lawless have made numerous invaluable contributions to this area of study. Shuman, one of the leading contemporary folklorists working on personal narrative and social justice issues, integrates folklore, sociolinguistics, communications, ethnographic studies, feminist

studies, cultural studies, and many more theoretical perspectives to what she refers to as “making meaning” from everyday stories—a fundamentally interdisciplinary approach to scholarly work.

Many times we get the “what” from a scholar’s research topic, but never have I read a more compelling and personal “why” in relation to studying and sharing one’s research as Lawless articulates in *Women Escaping Violence* (2001). She confesses to having been fundamentally altered by her experience of her research and states, “I believe that no work is worthy of our time and attention unless it breaks our hearts” (2). I couldn’t agree more and this sentiment is exactly why I decided to focus on an issue that is very important to me and has been transformative in my own life. My research has stemmed from the many personal accounts of horrific injustice and invisible suffering that broke my heart and made me question my own responsibility as a witness to such testimonies and life stories. Lawless says, “I acknowledge and embrace both the personal and political in this work; to do otherwise would be to make the work a farce, to render it corrupt” (2). She takes responsibility for her own bias and the openly subjective perspective from which she presents her work. Lawless does more than report her findings, she clearly states that her book “is a work for justice” (2).

As an interdisciplinary ethnographer, I am applying my academic/activist work to provide a thesis that is both scholarly and applicable to the movement to abolish the death penalty. Like Lawless, I freely admit to my own bias and subjective presentation of the research in this thesis, as an activist in the movement to abolish the death penalty. However, I also argue that this work bridges the scholar/activist divide by simultaneously

pushing the boundaries of folklore scholarship to aid activist organizations as they make decisions about how to prioritize their objectives in order to achieve abolition as quickly as possible, while also pushing the activist movement to recognize the significance of personal experience narratives in reaching their goals to end the death penalty in the U.S.

Within the death penalty abolition movement, the relationship between the teller and listener is significant in understanding why personal experience narratives are such a powerful mechanism for activism and movement-building. Davis suggests that narratives are powerful because they are social practices (16). He explains, “Sharing stories involve two parties, a teller (or narrator) and an audience (listeners/readers), and well-told stories establish a relationship between the two” (16). Within my own research, I have found that the intention, motivation, creativity, and accountability of the teller are all directly related to the way in which his or her performance establishes human connection and empathy among an audience, invoking the embodiment of action and fostering a collective consciousness in the death penalty abolition movement.

Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer note the interdisciplinary relations within the study of the use of language in social life, the relationship of the “verbal and the sociocultural in the conduct of speaking” (1989, 6). There is a potential for an applied component to ethnographic research through the investigation of problems that stem from different ways of speaking and could be a factor in what Bauman and Sherzer refer to as the “clarification and solution of practical problems” (12). The idea of being able to affect change through the study of communicative activities intrigues me the most. My motivation for studying how people, organizations, and movements use personal

narrative as a tool for activism stems in part from the idea that I may be able to apply my interdisciplinary training as a folklore scholar to help solve problems or aid in effective communication for social change.

In recent decades, so much has changed the way we “hear” a personal account of injustice. Oral storytelling, memoir, journal articles, photography, documentary, social media, and so many more mediums now influence how the public views, hears, listens, and acts when confronted by stories of human rights violations. I agree with Meg Jensen and Margaretta Jolly as they urge scholars to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the study of human rights narratives in their book *We Shall Bear Witness* (2014). Personal narrative is powerful and important in the fight for social justice and human rights and in navigating the complicated conditions and contradictions that individuals, organizations, and movements face.

Katy Ryan collects and discusses the importance of literary contributions by death row prisoners, playwrights, poets, activists, and scholars that lend human voices and perspectives to a topic that is often burdened by statistics and politics. She argues that literature and literary criticism play an active and important role in the broader struggle for justice in the U.S. Ryan states, “Writers are a vital part of the death penalty history, contributing broadsides, pamphlets, essays, poems, novels, songs, autobiographies, and plays to the national debate” (2012, 2). This speaks to the power of ethnography in making social justice issues publicly known through creative works. This is why stories matter.

The death penalty abolition movement has enjoyed considerable publicity and success with as many as eight states abolishing or issuing a moratorium on executions in the U.S. within the past seven years. The momentum is expected to continue as there are active death penalty repeal campaigns in several states, according to the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (2017). In a recent and widely televised address to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis called for the abolition of the death penalty in the U.S., bringing the topic and debate to the forefront of our national discourse. According to a 2010 public opinion poll listed on the Death Penalty Information Center's website (2017), 61% of the U.S. population would choose an alternative to the death penalty as a punishment for murder.

Collecting and disseminating the stories of exonerees and activists who have been a part of the movement for many years is a great way to provide a counternarrative to mainstream political stereotypes about the death penalty within our cultural identity and criminal justice system in the U.S. that build upon the idea that those who are on death row are less human and thus deserving of being executed. By connecting with personal narratives, others are able to relate to and make a human connection with those directly affected by the polarizing and political issue of the death penalty. Personal accounts give a face, a physical human body, to suffering and bring meaning to the "human" part of human rights. Hearing and relating to other individuals through their narratives builds empathy and community. These are all part of the roles that personal narratives play within the death penalty abolition movement in the present-day U.S.

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BIOGRAPHY

Annie Hallman graduated from Fayette County High School, Fayette, Alabama, in 1995. She received her Bachelor of Science from the University of North Alabama in 2000. She served in the Army and has been supporting private industry and federal agencies for fifteen years and received her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from George Mason University in 2017.