The Right to Speak. Wally Lamb and the Women of York Correctional Institution: *Couldn't Keep It To Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters*. New York: Regan Books, 2003

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1 The stories collected in *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* are the result of a writing workshop for women prisoners held by Wally Lamb at York Correctional Institution. Although they all are biographical, the stories the women tell are not what one might expect them to be: pessimistic, gloomy, or filled with hatred against prison and society. Taking us into the past and present lives of the authors, these pieces are full of hope - although the majority of incidents they relate are distressing -, and the subjects that emerge from them before our eyes are primarily individual persons, not convicted criminals.

2 Don't you ever say a word. Throughout their lives the women who contributed to *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* were silenced. What happens in this house stays in this house. Silenced by those who abused them, battered or molested them - by fathers, mothers, uncles, brothers, husbands, supposed friends of the family, and neighbors. Skip the lip service, you rotten, ungrateful little liar. It is for this reason that their contributions to this collection of autobiographical stories are, as Wally Lamb states in the introduction, "victories against voicelessness - miracles in print" (9).And don't you dare say a thing. One of the main achievements of *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* is that in each of the stories the authors practice writing as a form of re(dis)covering their own voices, and every one of them succeeds in doing so as the presence of a multiplicity of individual, clearly distinguishable voices proves. The voices we may discover belong to adults and to children, they are chatty, sarcastic, matter-of-fact, distanced, involved, and angry. Most amazingly, however, none of these voices is bitter - a fact that is more than remarkable taking into account what every one of the authors experienced in the course of her life. Of the eleven contributors ten were or still are inmates of York Correctional Institution (with the exception of Nancy Birkla, who was imprisoned in the Kentucky State Penitentiary for Women). Of these ten all but one were sexually abused as children. More often than not the experience of sexual violence continued as they grew older, perpetuated by abusive boyfriends and husbands. Eight of these ten women were beaten throughout their lives.

3 Drawing attention to the links between self-awareness and power, Lamb writes about the contributors that "in taking on the subject of themselves - making themselves vulnerable to the unseen reader - they have exchanged powerlessness for the power that comes with self-

awareness" (5). Indeed, questions of self-awareness, power and control over one's own life play a crucial role in all of the stories, and by successfully implementing these notions in their works the women emerge as true authors - subjects with the authority to speak from their own point of view rather than being spoken (for) by others. Growing more aware of themselves, the women featured in *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* discover their own, individual voices, and they do so in an environment in which "expressions of individuality" are "taboo" (342), as Dale Griffith, teacher at York and the only contributor never incarcerated, remarks in "Bad Girls." Writing themselves into being, the women take control over themselves and their past as well as their future lives. In so doing each of them allows us to see her on her own terms, to look "beneath the surface of her conviction to the complexities that shaped her for prison" (Griffith 343). In this manner, *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* affords us a personal, inside perspective rather than directing our gaze through the labeling and objectifying prison bars depicted not only on the cover but reproduced at the beginning of each of the chapters of the hardback edition. The *sine qua non* of this ability to make oneself seen on one's own terms is self-awareness. Before they could make others aware of themselves, the women who contributed to *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* therefore had to undergo a process of becoming aware not only of themselves but of the influences and experiences that turned them into the person they were or were becoming when they began to participate in Lamb's writing workshop. Each of the stories in *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* confirms that its author has accomplished this task. They have thus taken a decisive step towards enabling us, their readers, to fulfill the wish of Bonnie Foreshaw: "that people reading this book will bear in mind that we are human beings first, inmates second" (208).

4 The two ways of seeing and being seen referred to above, the inside and the outside perspective, are among the central concerns of Nancy Whiteley, whose two contributions ("The True Face of the Earth" and "Orbiting Izzy") open the collection. This is stressed by her juxtaposition of two quotations from the works of Saint-Exupéry: "[W]hat is essential is invisible to the eye" (23) and "The aeroplane has unveiled for us the true face of the earth" (50; emphasis omitted). On the one hand, both of her stories show a preoccupation with the point of view afforded from an airplane, from which one looks at things from an above or outside position and which allows us only to see the surface of things. Thus we find frequent references to outward appearance or facial expressions. Often, the protagonist's face is merely a mask, a surface hiding something that cannot be seen from the outside or above. Through her writing Whiteley seems to hint at the need to exchange the airplane-point of view for another one that focuses on what is invisible to the eye. Despite its promise, the former point

of view is unable to reveal the "true face of the earth," as the narrator remarks upon looking back onto her life at the end of the story: "*The aeroplane has unveiled for us the true face of the earth* . . . No way, I decided. I hadn't learned the truth about the face of the earth or anything else during those plane rides" (50-51; emphasis in the original). Looking at things or persons from an above or external point of view reveals nothing about their substance, their true face as opposed to the face as mask. Hence both of Whiteley's stories suggest that the fox's remarks in Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* are true: "[W]hat is essential is invisible to the eye" (23) and can only be discerned with the heart. Whereas looking at things or persons from an outside perspective results in labeling them according to what they appear to be, Whiteley enables us to look beneath the masks and labels. Through her writing she has thus created the place that she and her friend Paula once imagined: "a place where the labels people had stuck on us fell away like wet Band-Aids" (35). Accordingly, both "The True Face of the Earth" and "Orbiting Izzy" focus on friendship that does not depend on looks or appearances, but on true love and care. Whiteley-the-protagonist is unable to cope with the fact that she makes herself "vulnerable" (Lamb 5) by granting others such an inside perspective of herself, and finally backs out of the friendships described in the stories. Whiteley-the-author, however, refuses to retract. Instead, through publishing "The True Face of the Earth" and "Orbiting Izzy," she grants her readers an inside perspective on her life and self. Therefore, both stories are an appeal not to judge her and her fellow contributors on the basis of what they seem to be at first sight. They are proof of the fact that by making her self "vulnerable to the unseen reader" Whiteley has truly exchanged powerlessness for power (Lamb 5).

5 In Michelle Jessamy's "Motherlove" we find a similar juxtaposition between two ways of seeing and being seen. In this story, centering on the protagonist's teenage pregnancy, her struggle for the love of her mother and an incident of sexual abuse by a "friend" of the family when she was eleven, incidents of watching and being watched are contrasted with the narrator's attempts to make her mother see her. For example, on the day the abuse occurred, Mo'Shay, the protagonist, "stayed to watch Fred" repair the television when he started "staring strangely at her" and caused her to avert her eyes (252). During the ensuing abuse, Fred tells Mo'Shay: "Been watching you for a long time, little girl" (253). Instances like the abuse, in which seeing or watching is clearly associated with an objectification of the seen, contrast with references to the protagonist's mother's refusing to see, or recognize, her. At the dinner table, Mo'Shay has to "[steal] glances at her mother," whose "tired eyes looked out at nothing" (158), and only when she has turned her back at her does she feel "her mother's eyes

upon her" (258). Ironically, during the ensuing inquiry whether she might be pregnant, it is Mo'Shay who "[looks] away" (259) and her mother who demands: "'Could you at least face me when I'm talking to you?'" (258). This temporary exchange of roles draws attention to the fact that all the while Mo'Shay's mother has been the one refusing to face her daughter, not vice versa, and that it is a look of acknowledgement and recognition assuring her of her mother's love that Mo'Shay struggles for throughout the story. Other than the more tentative ending of Whiteley's stories, "Motherlove" closes with Mo'Shay and her mother finally looking at one another, not in a distanced, superficial manner but in a way that grants recognition and acknowledgement: "Shay looked up from the baby clothes to her mother's face. She smiled. Her mother smiled back" (264-265). Exchanging the threatening and objectifying gaze of the abuser for the acknowledging and reassuring look of her mother, the story of Mo'Shay is not only another offer to look beneath the surface but also an example of the positive and optimistic conclusion that almost all of the stories in *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* have. As such it contrasts significantly with Barbara Parsons Lane's "Puzzle Pieces" which, although showing the strongest preoccupation with questions of seeing and being seen, does not fully succeed in replacing the objectifying gaze of external observers with a look of acknowledgment and recognition from an involved reader. In consequence, Lane's story seems to be the least optimistic of the collection.

6 In "Puzzle Pieces," watching is inextricably tied up with exerting control, while being watched is inevitably to be turned into a powerless object. In the story's first chapter, significantly entitled "The Visit," Lane repeatedly points to her own inability to see and control. Sitting in the visiting room shortly after having entered prison, she remarks that since she has been imprisoned she has been unable to look at herself: "Until now, I haven't even thought about my appearance. I haven't been able to face myself in a mirror anyway" (213). At the same time one of her greatest concerns is that as a result of her crime she will be unable to look after her family: "I know I am in prison because I took a life and must be punished. I take full responsibility for my crime. My greatest punishment is not the loss of my freedom, [...] or the fears I face. Far worse than these is the separation from my children's lives - the lost opportunity to watch my grandchildren grow, the inability to make sure the family is safe" (216). Unable to watch her children and grandchildren, she feels she no longer has any influence on or control over their lives. At the same time Lane suffers immensely from the fact that in prison she is the one who is constantly being watched. The first two paragraphs of Chapter 3, entitled "Cell Door Window" (the window, that is, through which the officers watch the inmates in their cells), exclusively deal with acts of seeing or watching

and Lane's uncomfortableness with the latter:

> Walking up the stairs to my twelve-cell tier, I spot an inmate standing at her window, staring out at nothing. The faraway look on her face makes me nervous and I hurry past.
> I'm impatient as I stand in front of my locked cell door, waiting for the guard to see me and trigger the switch. [...]
> Our cell has two windows. One looks onto the compound. The other, a three-by-eighteen inch strip of glass built into the cell door, gives a narrow view of the corridor. [...] In her boredom, Sherry stands at our skinny strip of window and broadcasts bulletins about what she sees. [...] I roll onto my side and face the wall, hoping to discourage Sherry's chatter. *Who cares?* I want to scream. *Do you know what you look like from the other side of that door? A caged animal, that's what!* (219; emphasis in the original)

We learn that one reason for Lane's extreme feelings with regard to being watched is her mother's stay in a psychiatric hospital when Lane was seventeen. Conceiving of her mother as a "caged mental [patient]" (219), she abhorred the fact that she and her younger siblings came to the hospital to look at their mother as you look at a caged animal, an object. The second, and probably more important reason why Lane suffers so much from being watched, is her marriage to Mark, whom she shot in a frenzy when he told her he had sexually abused her granddaughter, something Lane experienced herself as a child. In the case of Mark, watching is inextricably tied up with control and threat. Not only does he follow his wife around in order to watch and control her, he also "floods [their] yard with light to prevent burglaries" (222). By bathing his belongings, among which he also counts his wife, in light (i.e. by making them visible), he brings them under his control. On other occasions, Mark threatens his wife and others to "watch their backs" (224) or to "watch out" (25). These incidents are only two of the numerous examples of how Mark is associated with watching. It is highly significant that Lane "can't remember shooting Mark but can still see the look of hatred on his face the moment before" (215-216), thus reducing her husband wholly to someone who looks. More than any other of the stories of *Couldn't Keep It To Myself*, "Puzzle Pieces" illustrates what it means to be objectified by a (male) gaze, and it is due to her experiences with both her husband and her mother's hospitalization that Lane refuses to join her cell mate in watching out of the cell window. To her, looking out of this barred opening appears to be equivalent to succumbing to the objectifying gaze of those who stand on the other side of the window, looking in. Thus she writes: "I will *not* go to my cell window and stare out without a purpose. *Get away from that window!* [...] *Don't let this place swallow you up! Don't become a caged animal!*" (222; emphasis in the original). According to this logic, to watch is to make oneself susceptible to being watched by others. Therefore, Lane seems to believe that if she does not watch, she can withdraw herself from the objectifying gaze of those who watch her from an

external point of view. This logic is faulty in the sense that it renders her passive and thus keeps her from claiming her own point of view. This is strongly emphasized by the fact that Lane ends "Puzzle Pieces" with letters from her children in which they "write, from their own perspectives, about the 'then and now' of [her] crime and punishment" (240). Although Lane tells her story from her own perspective, and although she assures us that she has become "more self-aware" and that her "eyes are wide open" (238), she does not, or at least not completely, succeed in deconstructing or averting the objectifying gaze directed at her from beyond the prison bars. Once more succumbing to the perspective of others at the close of her story, she ends up being the object of another's gaze again.

7 In contrast to Lane, whose faulty notion of control keeps her from fully claiming her own point of view and taking control over how she lets others see her, Tabatha Rowley succeeds in doing both in and through "Hair Chronicles." The latter is an intricate negotiation of questions of self-awareness and power in relation to the two ways of seeing and being seen elaborated above. Having used her changing hairstyles to picture the process during which she came to be more self-aware and regained control over her life, Rowley writes at the end of "Hair Chronicles": "Today I am a woman with better decision-making skills and control over my actions. Physically, mentally, and spiritually, I am strong. My hair charts the history of how I got this way" (110). The two different ways of seeing and being seen are also exemplified by her hair. In the past, Rowley describes, her different hairstyles were not meant to signify something essential but were merely a fashion statement: "For some, dreads are worn as a political statement against oppression, but mine were about style, not about substance" (98). Rather than conceiving of her hair as a "testament to the world" about who she really is (102), at that time Rowley used it as a form of camouflage or mask. Whenever she ran away from home, she changed her outward appearance: "I would cut my hair and dye it a different color. My hair would keep the cops from recognizing me, I figured, in case Ma put out a missing person report" (109). In this sense, Rowley's hair allowed her to restrict other people to the airplane-point of view of Whiteley's story in that it prevented them from looking beneath the surface to her "real" self. It is in prison that she realizes that the self she sought to protect through her camouflage never existed, and that her changing hairstyles, which she claimed to be mere style, were in fact only expression of her search for a substance: "In an effort to figure out who I am," Rowley thus writes, "I have sported some pretty big styles and some pretty wild cuts" (105). It follows that the control she believed she had over others' perceptions through the style of her hair was not genuine in that it lacked a coherent subject fulfilling the function of an agent. As a consequence of this insight, Rowley decides to

forsake the "processed styles" she forced upon her hair and her self in the past (109) and lets both "go natural" (105). From this point on her hair no longer serves her as a form of camouflage but indeed becomes a "testament to the world" about who she really is (102). Not only has she therefore finally (re-)discovered her self, the individual underneath the surface, the substance beneath the style, she also allows us to exchange the external point of view, which used to grant her protection, for the inside one. Although Rowley makes herself "vulnerable to the unseen reader" by exposing her true self (Lamb 5), the possible "[m]ockery" that might result from this exposition has, she assures, "lost some of its power over [her]" (109). This is aptly illustrated by her remark that rather than burning combed or cut hair to keep anyone from putting a spell on her (100), she now simply flushes it down the toilet, self-assured that nobody but herself has control over her own life. Like her hair, Rowley's contribution to *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* is a "testament to the world" about who she is. As such, it clearly forsakes the treacherous security of the external, the airplane-point of view and lets its readers partake in its protagonist's (as well as its author's) progress towards self-awareness, power, and genuine control.

8 It is this newfound control over their lives which Rowley, and all other contributors, express by taking control over their texts (with the possible exception of Lane, who hands her text over to her children in the end). Two stories explicitly using this practice to draw attention to their authors' control over their texts are Nancy Birkla's "Three Steps Past the Monkeys," and Brenda Medina's "Hell, and How I Got Here." In the latter, the narrator's description of events constantly undermines the views voiced by the protagonist (her younger self). As in many of the other contributions, it is the issue of control that comes to the fore in Medina's story. "Control of my own life," she writes, "was a fight I intended to win" (154). She describes how in a struggle to escape from her controlling mother's grasp she runs into the arms of a controlling and abusive boyfriend who introduces her to an even more controlling gang. Having been present at a gang-related killing, Medina enters prison aged seventeen with a conviction for murder and a sentence of twenty-five years without parole. Since in prison she is ironically freed from the control of both the gang and her boyfriend, she begins a process of taking control over herself and her own life again. Unimpressed by the consequences of her behavior, Brenda, once she has entered York Correctional Institution, decides that in the future she will do whatever she wants to do. The narrator finally exposes the faulty assumption of her younger self, i.e. that taking control over one's own life can be accomplished by becoming a troublemaker with a "badass" reputation (172). She does so by repeatedly showing that, paradoxically, this form of control is inextricably linked with

confinement. Whenever Brenda leaves her unit, she has the freedom of choice to be constrained either by leg chains or handcuffs (171). Concerning her attack of a fellow inmate, the narrator remarks: "By the time I regained control, I'd been pinned down to the floor, shackled, and handcuffed" (171). Through linking her younger self's notion of control with the contradictory notion of constraint, Medina exposes the paradoxical and illusionary status of this control. At the same time the fact that she does so serves as a sign to the reader that Medina has not only realized the mistakes of her younger self, but that she has exchanged illusionary for true control by taking control over her text. As a consequence, the end of "Hell, and How I Got Here," in which we witness the author's younger self realize that she has to change her behavior in order to regain genuine control over her life, is highly convincing in the optimism it imparts, despite the fact that Medina was facing another sixteen years of incarceration at the time she was writing this story.

9 Birkla's "Three Steps Past the Monkeys" is an even more striking demonstration of what it means to have control over one's own text. Describing the painful process of unlocking suppressed childhood memories of sexual abuse, Birkla's story plays with various notions of recovery. She addresses recovery not only in the sense of recovering from her addiction but, more importantly, deals with questions of re-/discovering buried memories and the importance of being able to re-cover (i.e. cover up again) these memories after retrieving them. Throughout the story, Birkla thus stresses the importance of surfaces - devices, that is, for covering or hiding things. Realizing in prison that she cannot maintain the "recovery self" (127) she built up during her previous stay in a substance abuse treatment center without practicing self-recovery first, Birkla succeeds in uncovering the memories of sexual abuse hidden beneath the protective surfaces. At this point, then, she can begin to re-cover in the sense of covering up these memories with the prospect of regaining her physical and mental health. However, it is not only her self-conscious use of language and imagery which shows that Birkla has successfully taken control over her life and text again. She explicitly stages herself in this position of control when she describes how she renounced her "self-assigned role as victim" (121) and succeeded in breaking free from the vicious circle of succumbing to her husband's control, refusing to take responsibility, and reverting to self-destruction by means of drugs. By referring to her role as marital victim as "self-assigned" (121) she replaces one fiction (that of the woman as passive victim without any control over the abusive situation) with another, albeit even more cynical one (the fiction that she has brought all of this upon herself). Employing the second fiction as a tool of regaining agency and control over her own life, Birkla shows that she has actively and consciously freed herself from her

abusive husband. She is thus not only the author of the story, which retraces her process of self-recovery, but in the story itself she figures as an author of a fiction enabling her to take control over her own life again. Intricately linking issues of self-awareness, authorship, and control, "Three Steps Past the Monkeys" is a comment both on how Birkla conceives of herself and on how she wishes to be seen by her readers, i.e. as an author, a subject with control over her narrative as well as her life, and as someone speaking with the authority granted by her own point of view.

10 Due to limitations of space, a number of stories from *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* had to remain unaddressed. Like Birkla's, these, too, link notions of self-awareness and control (over the text as well as life). Frequently, the process of coming to self-awareness is not only a central aspect of the narrated action, but the carefully chosen language and imagery as well as the diligent construction of the stories betray a strong sense of what it is the authors wished to convey. In addition, the author's self-consciousness or -awareness is often emphasized by a recognizable, almost ironic, distance between the experiencing and the narrating *I*. Thus, in nearly all of the stories, the narrators are indeed much more self-confident, powerful and self-aware than the younger self who is the protagonist of the story. Each piece is as successful as the others in allowing its author to emerge as a powerful subject with her own voice and her own point of view to speak from. Carolyn Ann Adams, Bonnie Foreshaw, Robin Cullen, and Diane Bartholomew thus also manage to replace the point of view of external, uninvolved observers with an insider's perspective on their person and their lives. They allow us to see them as they see themselves and wish to be perceived by others, thereby eluding the labeling and objectifying power of the prison bars on the cover through returning the gaze. It is highly significant that of all possible artworks it should be "a disjointed patchwork replica of the Mona Lisa" (Lamb 13), produced by the inmates in an art class, that is depicted on the frontispiece of the hardback edition, the portrait of a woman, who in an almost disturbing and steady manner returns the gaze of the observer. The fragmented picture has not lost any of its original's uncanny capability to unsettle the spectator by creating a feeling of being watched. What is more, it is precisely its fragmentation that makes it a fitting image for the stories Couldn't Keep It To Myself comprises. Not only does it direct our attention to the fact that most of the women have experienced things that shattered their sense of wholeness or unification. More importantly, it emphasizes that each of the pieces of the collection is unique with regard to the perspective it grants us and with regard to the subject it represents. "The smooth space of patchwork," Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "is to demonstrate that 'smooth' does not mean homogeneous, quite the contrary [...]" (477). At the

same time, they describe patchwork as "[a]n amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways [...]" (476). Neither homogeneous nor completely disjointed, both fragmented and interrelated in "an infinite number of ways," the stories of *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* interlock to form a multi-faceted rather than seamless whole.

11 This impression of uniqueness and authenticity is slightly marred by Wally Lamb's introduction. The book could certainly have done with a less detailed description of Lamb's motivation to become a teacher, the success of his first novel, and his inability to say "no" without an index card. Even though followed by a more conventional introduction, these introductory remarks undermine the overall project of *Couldn't Keep It To Myself*: to enable its contributors to speak for themselves, in their own voices and from their own point of view. It remains unclear why Lamb could not position himself on an equal level with the other contributors, for example by turning his personal experiences into a story similar to the one by his colleague Dale Griffith. By framing the women's stories with his own voice and personality (a circumstance also expressed by the fact that Lamb's name completely dominates the cover of the hardback edition), Lamb not only draws attention away from the contributors and onto himself, but also stages himself as someone with control over the women's texts and voices. This becomes particularly apparent in his remarks on editing in the "Notes to the Reader." All of us are aware of the fact that a process of editing is involved in publishing such a collection of stories. But does Lamb not somehow undermine the project of the book by telling its readers in such a concrete and highly detailed manner to what extent the editor was actually involved in the production of the published pieces? Yet despite these drawbacks, the pieces comprised in *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* (particularly when read for themselves rather than mediated through Lamb's introduction) are a powerful and moving testimony to the reader about who their authors were and are. Each of the women enables us to see her on her own terms, from an inside rather than an outside perspective - and each of them certainly makes us aware of the fact that in the first place she is a unique person, not an inmate.

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