

## Experiences in Identitary Writing with Women Living Through Violence

*Oficinas de escrita feminista para mulheres privadas de liberdade, em Morelos, como ferramenta de denúncia, resistência e de visibilidade coletiva*

| México |

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**P**rison lockdowns triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic were widespread and affected

families of inmates and aid groups across Mexico. As many workshops were suspended, people deprived of liberty were forced to live in double confinement, further isolated from their families.

Our goal as a collective is to use feminist identity writing and art as a tool to shed light on the gender, class and ethnic oppression experienced by women in prison. To that end, we had worked consistently inside the Atlacholoaya Women's Center, in the state of Morelos, Mexico, since 2007, through workshops where women could learn to write poetry and feminist narratives. Still, the onset of a worldwide pandemic forced us into new forms of collective work that included women who had already left prison.

From our Editorial Collective Hermanas en la Sombra (Sisters in the Shadow), we turned to identity writing as a methodological instrument for liberation and political denunciation in spaces of confinement (see <https://hermanasenlasombra.org/>) – a tool not limited to those contexts, but which can be put to good use in different spaces where women experience any

kind of violence. In a workshop experience, the *hechiceras de jade* (jade sorceresses, as they named themselves) succeeded in becoming the first generation of women writers instructed and trained by Collective members who lived in prison confinement and now offer those workshops.

It was by resisting through the pandemic and through networks woven and strengthened by the alliances we forged – with Joey Whitfield, from Cardiff University, and Lucy Bell, from Surrey University, for example – that our sisters in the Collective who have been released from prison managed to become facilitators of this methodology. Their resistance meant not only an appropriation of that knowledge, but also resilience in a context where the pandemic had exacerbated how asymmetric access to digital communication already was. These women managed to approach new technologies, and with that, strengthen their autonomy: they learned basic computer concepts, how to use word processing software to capture their writing, and how to manage virtual meeting platforms, which has allowed them to share their experiences and written work in Mexico and abroad.

A call to donate computers – fruitful thanks to the solidarity of our support networks – was their first step towards becoming facilitators of a methodology already familiar to them since they learned it, in prison, which was now part of their own knowledge. Once their training as facilitators was complete, they first shared their workshop at an addiction rehabilitation center run by Manón Vázquez, one of the sisters in the Collective. Then, in the month of April, the Águila del Mar (Ocean Eagle) experience began, with Suzuki Lee and Valentina Castro now as workshop instructors leading a group of women who were starting their own path in writing. On April 13, the Jade Sorceresses came to life: 25 women in rehabilitation who, each arriving from a different path of recovery, joined together in a single path toward transforming into writers.

*Hechiceras de Jade* is a harmonious dance between women who shared different forms of enclosure and who managed to conjure healing from writing; letters can be medicinal, too. The workshop was a space for collective learning and for the interaction of knowledge. It was not about having classes, nor memorizing concepts or theories, but about participating in learning and affectivity and sorority. The identity writing methodology that we develop builds a sense of the collective among women, and through that allows feminist reflections

on sorority, on us and others, on patriarchy and romantic love, on the body, on autonomy, and on writing as a transformative tool. These topics that served as the axes of our workshop were drawn from a manual containing the magic ripened over 13 years of the Hermanas en la Sombra Collective's work - a manual germinated from the earth through the pen of Elena de Hoyos, Aída Hernández and Marina Ruiz and under the careful gaze of María Vinós. *Renacer en la Escritura: Manual para la Intervención Feminista en Espacios Donde se Vive Violencia* (Reborn in writing: A manual for feminist intervention in spaces where violence is experienced), the last booklet by the Collective, which will be presented soon, is meant to provide the means for this methodology to be replicated in other spaces.

The workshop was rigorously organized: days before each session the fellow workshop instructors met online to plan it, outlining and adapting contents and exercises, as well as for Elena de Hoyos and Marcia Trejo, both excited and proud to guide others down this new path, to select the instructors assigned to that particular session.

Every Tuesday, for 120 minutes, workshop participants explored the seven core themes of the workshop, with the guidance of fellow collective members Marcia Trejo, Paloma Rodríguez, Daniela Mondragón and Lucia Espinoza. At the beginning of each session, they performed ritual, brain training or guided visualization exercises, tools that were used to lay the groundwork for the *Sorceresses'* words to germinate; then, the group read and discussed feminist texts to develop theoretical resources that would strengthen our analytical exchanges, and used writing prompts to inspire writing that was later shared aloud. At the end of each session, a short exercise was conducted to honor our companions' work and the sharing of experiences.

This cycle of learning would come to a close at the foot of a Tepoztec mountain, on the first Saturday of the seventh month. The Sisters in the Shadow and the Jade Sorceresses' sororal union conduced the morning to harmoniously wrap a 13-week cycle of manifesting and strengthening healing words. Our memories still carry the sheer magic from that day: we managed to overcome a pandemic context and share a workshop with other women who now saw themselves as writers, as autonomous women, as part of a rebirth from writing, their creative path ahead, the loving experience of building collectively behind them. The workshop was the soil in which we cultivated words as seeds, to which we offered the water

of our tears for the buried pains we shared, the air that reminded us of the liberating ability to let go of our enclosures, and the renewing fire that kept us warm and protected in our bunch. And so, we blossomed on the other side of those 13 weeks as workshop participants and instructors, as writers, as new sisters, and as free women.

We are convinced that *feminist activism* is a path for social transformation, that from art, activism and sorority, change can be achieved: we can make visible and eradicate violence, and we can heal ourselves. Through sorority, the different enclosures that were shared touched the light of freedom, a light that is reflected in the letters that the *Jade Sorceresses* now share in a selection of the exercises that were performed during the workshop.

## **Writing...**

**Adriana Fernández**

Writing, I felt sad,

because I have opened wounds unhealed.

Writing, I can talk about my life, my dreams,

about opening a Mexican food restaurant,

about moving ahead as an empowered woman struggling each day

and helping other women on their way through life.

Writing, I felt sad and angry.

Writing, I can value my body in letters,

the things I have, and learn to feel and love myself as I am.

**I must tell me**

**Angelica Limón**

That I want to involve me in my own embrace,

in life and in this love,

paint my life colored, take away all the pain,

and the loneliness,

I want to sing to God,

return to heaven,

be who I am,  
  
work, make music,  
  
tell the world that God is there,  
  
write poetry, learn the piano,  
  
shout to the world that I love myself.

### **How it changed my life**

#### **Edna Salinas**

I was about to go mad  
  
That enclosure made my spiritual, etheric, christic and divine bodies pulverized  
  
I felt as if in a grave...  
  
Being enclosed is inhumane, I survived through meditation.  
  
While I did whatever I was doing. I decreed

that I was not in that enclosure with those people

That their history did not let them know how to treat their equals,

because it had treated them badly too.

There was confusion, fear, so much uncertainty...

When the sisters from the Collective arrived, they gave new breath to my life

I felt like I could faint at any moment

When I saw them and they played the drum, they revived me

Reminded me of who I was, what I loved, my essence

Through writing, they helped me to find a christic path of forgiveness

My confinement was not physical, but spiritual, etheric, mental and emotional

They helped me to remember my essence, my divinity, my self-love.

**Blue Harbor**

**Fernanda Zoto**

We love unrequited and we do not love those who have loved us

We are strong by being together, through our sister pains

Because we are sorcerous women, loving mothers, judged

Smiling changes our lives, swimming against the current.

We are in a quiet blue harbor, no drugs and no alcohol.

We are the security of our families,

we love the shunned.

We feel safe on this boat,

although sometimes it is not blue, sometimes black or red or multicolored.

Today we are a pearl that was first a stone in the rough,

but polished herself with love!

**Us: Strength and Will**

**Michelle Salto**

We are our families' biggest fear,  
  
but we are also unrepeatable magic.  
  
We are one and the same, sailing on the boat of pain,  
  
trying to get to the coast of tranquility.  
  
We are our own harmony,  
  
fighting not to fall into agony,  
  
healing my wounds with love, joy and tenacity.

### **If I were a man**

**Moirá Díaz**

If I were a man, I would love your thorns,  
  
little cactus with polka dots of unprescribed needles.  
  
If I were a man, I would sing to you a loving ballad with my guitar.  
  
If I were a man, I would go down your beautiful cello curves

and make you eternal in the symphony of my memory.

If I were a man, I would find a way to keep you away from the evil that is me,

because I am a man.

## **Snowflakes**

### **Ruth Valle**

Life is only one, just only one. Hours pass and do not stop; the past does not forgive. I wish I were a snowflake so that I could travel after the dimension off time to a beam of light; and see how life passes, facet after facet. At the moment of descent, every layer of your being fades away; you are wasting away without feeling every distance traveled; as you go you realize that there are more flakes around you, some bigger, some smaller, but in the end, they are all the same.

Still in the atmosphere of colors, each color is your senses, such as humor, character, happiness, anger, love, sadness, and more senses. And when you see the end of the light, when you go past true reality, to the place where you will stay all your life: fear comes, the uncertainty of not knowing where to fall; the most painful thing is to think how it can hurt or maybe break you in two. There is the real fear that looms.

The sun comes out and the fog goes away, when you see everything clearly, you see that true reality, which you knew from birth, you knew that one day you would melt, hoping to become only water. Another time of the season arrives, the sun is rising, I am evaporating, slowly spending myself until I reach the sky, turning into a beautiful cloud full of water: my

cycle starts again. The beginning of a new life with every breath of courage has just begun,  
wailing my splendor into the bud of a flower.

## **Solitude mine**

**Yessenia Bahena**

I will touch my soul and write with the fluid of the quill in my being

I am the muse of my poetry, I become my own among letters.

In booklets I will go on undressing, with a red pen, in a half-lit room.

And each night, finding my solitude as I lye in my bed is fulfillment.

I am mine.