

Leaving a Light on for Ash

Explorations into the Activist Mothering of Coralee Smith (Mother of Ashley Smith, 1988-2007)

Over the last decades, scholars have investigated mothers' roles in ensuring their daughters and loved ones unexplained disappearances and deaths by violence are publicized and acknowledged. Here, I draw from previous scholarship to explore whether there are commonalities between a mother's quest for justice after her daughter's death in a Canadian prison and other mothers who similarly demand accountability after a loss. The mother's name is Coralee Smith, the mother of the well-known teenager and deceased prisoner, Ashley Smith. In this text, I work to theorize Coralee Smith's agency by drawing parallels with other mothering actions to demand redress for disappearances and losses. In this text, I offer fresh insights to the mothering literature by focusing on activism by parents of criminalized children, rather than adding to the studies on criminalized mothers. Incarcerated mothers are the subject of recent scholarship, but little research is available on the experience of mothers who provide support to incarcerated daughters and who demand accountability following deaths in custody.

“When we try to grasp at the cinders, they crumble and burn.”

—Hawkes, “Containing the Testimony,” 936.

“Wishing I were free, Free like a bird.”

—Ashley Smith, “My Life,” qtd. in Richard 2.

Over the last decades, scholars have investigated work by mothers to ensure their daughters' unexplained disappearances and deaths by violence are publicized and acknowledged (Bejarano; Burchianti; Baydar and İvegen; Sosa; Wright). The studies explore the construction of motherhood as a

demonstration of political agency. In a 2016 article, “Remember, S/he Was Here Once: Mothers Call for Justice and Peace in Turkey,” Emine Rezzan Karaman closely examines the Saturday Mothers, a collective that publicized the disappearances of political dissidents under police custody in İstanbul, and the Peace Mothers, the mothers of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) fighters (382-410). While citing circumstances where a mothering focus constrained activism, Karaman concludes the women effectively used their collective suffering as a basis for a social movement. In vocalizing their grief, the mothers convincingly argued their loved ones were persons whose loss was deeply felt. Rather than “troublemakers,” the mothers asserted the deceased were prized and had names (393). As a result, the disappeared became more than “numbers in human rights reports” whose deaths were inexplicable (693). The mothers forced the realization their children and loved ones were “disappeared and killed” (393). As survivors who refused to be merely victims of tragedy, the protestors capably expressed their political agency by continually searching for the disappeared and by nurturing those who remained alive (390).

While showcasing mothering advocacy in general, this article is particularly inspired by one mother’s dedication to publicizing the circumstances surrounding her daughter’s passing. The mother’s name is Coralee Smith, a former resident of Moncton, New Brunswick. She became a public figure following her daughter’s death in a federal prison (Smith, “The Prison System”). Throughout this article, I look into ways Ms. Smith’s demands for accountability resulted from her maternal status. I explore whether there are commonalities between a mother’s quest for justice after her daughter’s carceral death and other mothers who similarly demand accountability after a loss. In this effort to link varied protests, I use the term “disappearances” to describe deaths from varied circumstances—ranging from homicides to forced disappearances and kidnappings to the expiration of a young woman in solitary confinement who was practically as well as symbolically erased (Bromwich).

For many readers, Ashley Smith will be remembered as the teenager who died on October 2007, while detained in solitary confinement at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Ontario. In December 2013, Ashley Smith’s death was ruled a homicide by a coroner’s inquest jury. The guards who stood outside the cell videotaping Ashley’s last breaths were following orders that prohibited their intervention if she was still breathing. The homicide verdict reinforced the claim the correctional system and its agents caused Ashley Smith’s death, ending speculation she committed suicide. Prior to her death, Ashley was held in segregation for prolonged periods, and she was subjected to restraints, tasing, strip searches, full body wrapping, assaults,

surveillance, and constant transfers between institutions. Originally jailed at the New Brunswick Youth Centre, Ashley ultimately spent time in various federal women's prisons including the Regional Psychiatric Centre (RPC) in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Though not directly affiliated with a mothering advocacy group, Coralee's words and actions are juxtaposed with those of other mothers who banded together to denounce silences and erasures after a loved one's disappearance. This article investigates how Coralee's insistence on speaking as a parent, her repetition of Ashley's status as a child when she entered the prison system, her continual references to the safety of the family home, and her refusal to accept mother blaming discourses replicates strategies by other mothering advocates. While waiting for the coroner's inquest to conclude, the elder Ms. Smith argued, for example, it would be "unfair to lay responsibility for the tragedy at her daughter's feet" due to the degree of Ashley's mistreatment (Vincent, "Daughter Died from Homicide"). She explained her views came from her status "as a mother"; in other words, they were based on her perspective as a parent.

In addition to linking various mothering protests, I contribute to the scholarship by showcasing mothering advocacy in response to the unique type of loss mentioned—namely, a daughter's death in custody. The increasing number of incarcerated women in Canada as well as globally indicates that other mothers may experience a daughter's passing while jailed. This study's documentation of a mother's lived experience of a child's criminalization and death in custody may prompt debates about the appropriateness of prisons as a remedy, particularly for women (Bromwich and Kilty). Numerous studies have found that incarcerated women suffer from vulnerabilities, including some of the ones Ashley experienced. Typically, women who are criminalized have backgrounds informed by abuse, addiction, mental health, (inter)personal violence, homelessness, and social marginalization. These traumatic histories mean women are particularly vulnerable to harm within institutions, including self-harm. As a result, parental support and advocacy from the outside may influence imprisoned women's safety and even longevity.

The intense pressure placed on the justice system by Coralee Smith may be needed to prompt full disclosure regarding deaths in prisons. A 2016 study by Howard Sapers, then Correctional Investigator of Canada, found that families confronted institutional resistance from the Correctional Service of Canada when they sought information about a loved one's passing. Given Sapers' findings, the present study theorizing Coralee Smith's demands for accountability within the framework of mothering activism seems timely and significant. As conscripts into the prison experience, family members are often the main support system for persons in custody. Gillian Balfour

states that prisoners' relatives are the "voices of resistance and lived experience from the inside of the carceral state" (111). This article investigates Coralee's effectiveness in transferring responsibility for Ashley's incarceration and her death to correctional policies and programs, rather than internal family dynamics, to glean lessons for other anti-prison and mother activists.

Background Facts

Although Coralee Smith is a recognizable public figure, her advocacy about the injustice experienced by her daughter, Ashley Smith, has not been explored in prior studies. Perhaps understandably, the more prominent story of Ashley's death has overshadowed analysis of Coralee's work for public acknowledgement. After her daughter's death, Coralee Smith became a familiar media spokesperson who demanded information as well as accountability from correctional officials.

The extreme conditions Ashley Smith experienced while incarcerated have been highlighted in numerous media stories, academic articles, and a book-length manuscript (2015). A news story from *The Globe and Mail* carried the kind of provocative headline that surfaced during the inquest: "Inquest Shown Images of Ashley Smith Tranquilized, Duct-Taped by Prison Guards" (Perkel). The latest issue of the *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*—"Law, Vulnerability and Segregation: What have we learned from Ashley Smith's Carceral Death?" edited by Rebecca Bromwich and Jennifer M. Kilty—notes that 2017 marks the tenth anniversary of Ashley's death. The entire journal issue works to ensure Ashley's passing does not fade from public view. In the seven articles, various topics are addressed from a range of disciplines to "theorize how criminalized women and girls might alternatively be understood and approached in and through law, sentencing and corrections" (Bromwich and Kilty, 160). In the introduction, the editors summarize the case and present their critiques of the punitive carceral system (157-64).

Some of the details surfaced because advocacy groups, including the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS), and Ashley Smith's family pressed for full information. Kim Pate, then executive director, was originally contacted to intervene on Ashley's behalf by women inmates who urged her to meet with the young girl who was 'hurting herself' (Pate; Smith, "Dying from Improvement"). After being denied access to Ashley, Kim Pate moved to contact an inmate's kin directly for the first time in her career. Pate found Coralee Smith through contacts. With Coralee's assistance, Pate met Ashley Smith through the food slot of her cell door at the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon in May 2007. Pate found Ashley younger than her years yet respectful in her demeanour as well as "energetic" and "feisty" (Perkel,

“Ashley Smith Looked ‘Hopeless’”). The pair collaborated on a grievance that was only scrutinized several months after Ashley’s death. Kim Pate and Coralee Smith conversed again after Ashley’s death. Pate summarized her conversations with Ashley because she feared Ashley’s version would not be disclosed (Pate; Smith, “Dying From Improvement”).

When testifying at the coroner’s inquest that was finally convened, Coralee argued her family should not have been forced to push for five years for a “thorough airing” of the factors that went “tragically wrong” for a young woman who spent the last three years of her life in segregation (Perkel, “My Skin Is All Loose”). At the family’s insistence, particularly compelling evidence, including the surveillance video known as the “death video” of Ashley’s last moments, was made public (Canadian Press). Coralee also sought to counter allegations her daughter was incorrigible and, therefore, the author of her own fate.

Once seen by her family as a relatively content child and youth, Ashley Smith rapidly deteriorated during her incarceration. A psychiatrist, Jeffrey Penn, who interviewed Ashley in her first days in the adult prison system through the slot in her segregation cell, described her as a “large tyrannical child” who was a challenge to manage (qtd. in Perkel, “Ashley Smith”). After Ashley’s death, Coralee Smith conveyed other stories, including alarming details on Ashley’s treatment. In contrast to institutional accounts, Smith recalled her daughter as a loving and kind girl yearning to return to former comforts. According to Smith, “[Ashley] was very attached to home and that was her biggest wish when she was away, just to come home to her room and get in the bathtub” (Blanch). Coralee also revealed Ashley’s kindness, love of drawing, and fondness for collecting stuffed animals and dolls (Smith, “Dying from Improvement”). Through her testimony, Coralee has served as a witness to Ashley’s humanity and to her suffering while incarcerated.

Leaving a Light On For Ash

Like other mothers, Coralee grounded her resistance in her standing as a parent to legitimate her grief and to solidify her authority. In a 2009 story, Coralee Smith reported she incorporated her daughter into her routine by saying “good morning” and “good night” to Ashley every day (Zlomislic). *Toronto Star* reporter Diana Zlomislic noted that a stained-glass lamp in the dining room of the Smith’s Moncton home remained on since Ashley’s passing. It emitted a soft light for the young woman who feared the dark. In the article, Coralee Smith states: “This light we leave on for Ashley and that’s not going off until there’s some resolution to why the hell Ashley’s in the ground and not home” (Zlomislic).

Part I. Analyzing Mothering Activism

In this section, I briefly describe my interest in this paper's topic. I then move on to describe the methodology.

Interest in Activist Mothering

In May 2015, Coralee Smith gave a talk at the conference “A Canadian Crisis: Criminalization & Imprisonment of Indigenous Women & those with Disabling Mental Health Issues” at the University of Saskatchewan, which was organized by Kim Pate, then the Ariel F. Sallows Chair in Human Rights. Hearing Coralee's panel address deepened my interest in analyzing mothering activism in general and on behalf of Ashley Smith, in particular. An earlier event, the 2008 conference titled “Missing Women: Decolonization, Third Wave Feminisms and Indigenous Peoples of Canada and Mexico” at the University of Regina was also instructive and inspiring. Mothers of disappeared young women—including Sylvia Arce, Maria Sagrario Flores, Daleen Kay Bosse and Amber Redman—presented on their work to honour their daughters (Anderson et al.). The heartrending talks by mothers at these two events especially propelled my desire to investigate this topic.

Featuring Coralee Smith's Activism

This article moves beyond the important yet more common analysis of Ashley Smith's mental health issues and of institutional failures to examine the alternative topic of mothering activism.

The troubling details on Ashley's imprisonment are documented in several reports ranging from the 2008 *Ashley Smith Report* prepared by former New Brunswick Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate, Bernard Richard; *A Preventable Death* (2008) by Howard Sapers, then the Correctional Investigator of Canada; and *Response to the Coroner's Inquest Touching the Death of Ashley Smith* released by Corrections Canada in 2014. The reports highlight Ashley's years in solitary confinement and her resort to self-injury as a coping strategy. Her resort to the placement of ligatures around her neck or “tying up,” for example, began in the youth detention centre in the Miramichi region of New Brunswick (Zlomislac and Vincent). Few details on Coralee's life circumstances and the factors that prompted her to become an outspoken critic of Canadian corrections, beyond her affection for Ashley, have been made public. It is known Coralee Smith contacted the Office of the New Brunswick Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate (Richard). In addition, the Smith family unsuccessfully attempted to challenge the transfer to the federal adult prison system.

Toward a Methodology of the Remnants

The background information on Coralee Smith's work used in this text came from new stories primarily in the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail* as well as the 2010 documentary film *Out of Control*, by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *The Fifth Estate*. These resources were essential to theorizing a mother's experiences in the aftermath of her daughter's death. I listened and relistened to the online version of Coralee Smith's presentation to the 2015 Canadian conference challenging women's imprisonment (Smith, "Dying...").

In contrast to the public information I rely on, other scholars in other contexts have scrutinized extensive data. Cynthia L. Bejarano interviewed writers, scholars, journalists, activists from human rights organizations and mothers of slain daughters in Juarez, Mexico (128). Turkish ethnographer and historian Emine Rezzan Karaman spent three summers in Istanbul completing fieldwork with two protest organizations, the Saturday Mothers and the Peace Mothers. She also conducted qualitative interviews. In *Looking for Ashley: Re-reading What the Smith Case Reveals about the Governance of Girls, Mothers and Families in Canada*, Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich analyzed varied sources including reports, news articles and videos about Ashley (63-64). Even after her exhaustive scrutiny, Bromwich lamented that some texts were not publicly available, including internal reports and Ashley's diaries (58).

Martine Hawkes' 2008 and 2012 scholarship on archiving loss after genocide was helpful in justifying this study based on a data set of news reports. Hawkes draws from Derrida's theories around "the archive and the cinder" to examine what is missing and not recoverable in the aftermath of unimaginable loss. Hawkes's findings can be translated into a methodology that acknowledges and even embraces the fragments of information that suggest at, rather than convey, a complete story ("What Is Recovered"). Her comments support a methodology that analyzes the information bits that result when survivors attempt to recall and describe harmful, often horrific events. The difficulties the Smith family experienced making sense of Ashley's death seem illustrative of Hawkes' points. According to Coralee Smith, the harshness of a prison term was difficult for the Smith family to even fathom prior to Ashley's custody. Once sharing the common societal belief that prisons were "lovely," complete with steak dinners, Coralee changed her mind after Ashley's ordeal. For example, rather than consuming healthy meals with vegetables in a cafeteria, as Coralee assumed, Ashley was handed finger food in a solitary cell through a door slot (Smith, "Dying From Improvement").

Hawkes recommends that scholars acknowledge the limitations of archiving horrific loss while still giving the archive analytical weight. She suggests that information is always missing in the aftermath of tragedy when she states:

“That which eludes the archive is the lived experience of the event and the lived experience of the loss” (942, “Containing Testimony”). Hawkes discourages the quest for a tidy summary of catastrophic events because she believes our “rush to conclude and contain” means that researchers miss details by overlooking what Hawkes describes as “the patient cinder” which has the capacity to be haunting and therefore revealing (943, “Containing Testimony”). Hawkes’ scholarship was significant to this effort to listen closely for mothering references in Coralee Smith’s motivations for her advocacy work.

Insights from the Literature: Activist Mothering on Behalf of Disappeared Daughters

Scholarship on mothering activism written for over two decades provided rich background material for this study. Admittedly, the circumstances of Ashley’s death in a prison differ from losses resulting from enforced disappearances, abductions, and homicides attributed to state impunity. Because Coralee gained considerable access to the record during the inquest, she has greater knowledge than other mothers who may remain in the dark about their sons and daughters disappearances and deaths, even to the present day. In contrast to others who report ongoing turmoil, Coralee described her family as “at peace” once the inquest concluded (Taber). Other mothers studied elsewhere lacked support from advocates or lawyers. Their claims remained “outside the law,” as Karaman explains. As a result, they did not seek “any recognition in the existing realms of justice and citizenship” (392). In contrast, the Smith family retained Julian Falconer, a renowned litigator. The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies also advocated on behalf of the Smith family. The Smith family’s lawsuit against the Correctional Service of Canada for negligence was settled out of court in May 2011.

While acknowledging differences, I analyze Coralee Smith’s actions as a component of a diverse international movement formed by mothers to counter state indifference to a disappearance or death. Rezzan Karaman’s list of organizations includes the Soldiers’ Mothers in Russia, the Tiananmen Mothers in China, the Khavaran Mothers in Iran, the Kenyan Mothers, as well as the Turkish groups she studied. The number of groups listed demonstrates the significance of this international social movement (382). One famous mothering group, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, has remained active for over three decades and continues to be of scholarly interest. In *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, maintains this group realized new standards for human rights advocacy.

In her 2006 study “Las super madres de Latino America: Transforming motherhood by challenging violence in Mexico, Argentina, and El Salvador,”

Cynthia L. Bejarano examines the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to provide context for her main case study, activism by mothers of disappeared young women in Juarez, Mexico. She compares Mexican protests with those mounted in Argentina and El Salvador (126). Overall, Bejarano found the mothers rejected their confinement to domestic rather than political roles. They “threw off [the] gendered standards of citizenship assigned them and transformed their roles as mothers into motherist tools against death and oppression” (143).

Bejarano’s findings on the “transformation of gendered citizenship into forms of resistance by Latina mothers of ‘disappeared’ young women” were helpful in theorizing Coralee’s Smith conversion from a Maritime housewife into an anti-prison activist (126). The Latina mothers’ motivation for pressing for justice appears to be similar to Coralee Smith’s: “All of the desaparecidos [ones who have disappeared], regardless of where they were from were horrifically killed and their voices were silenced. The haunting of their children’s lives led the madres of these young women to challenge the actions of governments and their soldiers, police, and collaborating citizens” (130). Smith’s persistence and assertiveness undermine a prevailing view that commendable mothers are passive. Arguably, her resistance opened up space for marginalized mothers to challenge and provoke, even if they face barriers seemingly unknown to Coralee Smith—such as poverty, racialization, addiction, educational attainment limitations, physical or mental disability, or bias due to sexual orientation (Landertinger).

You Have to Fight for Your Children

Like the Latina mothers, Coralee used her status as a parent to legitimate her grief and to solidify her authority. In her 2014 publication, *Queering Acts of Mourning in the Aftermath of Argentina’s Dictatorship: The Performance of Blood*, Cecilia Sosa dedicates a chapter to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Sosa criticizes the ways disappearances have been “mainly processed as a family issue” (13). At the same time, Sosa recognized that “the evocation of this community of blood” was “politically fundamental” because the mothers’ mention of their familial connections to the disappeared made their claims impossible to ignore (14). Findings like these were aids to this quest to identify ways Coralee Smith’s outrage as a mother similarly legitimated her quest for justice.

One way that Coralee grounded her activism was by commonly referring to Ashley in domestic contexts, like the family home. Scenes from the 2010 documentary, *Out of Control*, are illustrative. In the documentary, Coralee shows the reporter around the Moncton residence where Ashley once lived. Coralee opens Ashley’s bedroom which was refurbished for her return at a much older age. Coralee describes the room as “Ashley’s grown-up room,” where she would

have lived after prison. Inside one closet is the collection of over four hundred dolls that Ashley collected as a child and youth.

Karaman explains why Smith's insistence on domesticating Ashley by speaking as her mother was crucial. The Turkish mothers in Karaman's study received limited redress from the Turkish state, yet they galvanized local and international concern regarding state disappearances. Drawing on Spivak, Karaman argues, "Women's presentation of themselves as 'mothers' appealed not only to normative assumptions about the political neutrality of motherhood but also functioned as 'strategic essentialism' ... to homogenize members, secure agency, and unite actors in resistance" (388). Coralee's parental connections to Ashley give credence to the depth of her loss. As a tribute to Coralee's persistence, *Globe and Mail* reporter Jane Taber interviewed Smith following the coroner's inquest jury's proclamation that Ashley's death was a homicide (Taber). In the article, Coralee Smith explained her "girls meant the world to [her]." When Coralee states, "you have to fight for your children," she expresses a viewpoint shared by other protestors in other parts of the world (Taber).

We Are Her Family. We Are Not Perfect

As the above statements reveal, Coralee Smith has worked to ensure that Ashley's death is not viewed in isolation. In news reports, she has connected Ashley's death to others in Canadian jails. In addition, she has chastised Correctional Services of Canada for its failure to act on the recommendations of the coroner's inquest, including those related to solitary confinement. The sympathetic inquest findings and the monetary compensation resulted from the family's persistence. In news reports, Coralee Smith has insisted that "Ashley died because no one in Canada really cared," presumably in contrast to the Smith family who cherished their daughter and sister (CBC, "No One Cared"). Her eloquent remarks as a grieving parent convincingly demonstrate that Ashley was victimized by the various institutions that failed to prevent her death.

At the coroner's inquest, Coralee was afforded considerable respect and deference. Rather than interrogated, she was routinely offered condolences. Like the Turkish mothers described by Karaman, Coralee was, however, subjected to at least some scrutiny as a parent. During the inquest, the jury heard evidence about Ashley's adoption when she was three-days old. It was rumoured the woman known as her sister was in fact her biological mother. Ashley's struggles were sometimes attributed to the secrecy surrounding her birth. On 15 April, 2013, the *Toronto Star* reported on the evidence of prison psychologist Dr. Cindy Presse. Dr. Presse testified she asked Coralee Smith questions about Ashley's biological mother because of the speculation her supposed sister had given birth to her. Coralee responded with a blank look that amounted to a

refusal to answer (Vincent, “Questions Resurface”). Coralee routinely forestalled questioning on Ashley’s adoption by redirecting attention to state agencies’ failures. The coroner who presided over the inquest into Ashley Smith’s death, Dr. John Carlisle, agreed that the issue was “a family matter.” The coroner ruled that questions on this topic were inappropriate.

The secrecy surrounding Ashley’s biological mother has been attributed to Coralee’s desire to uphold family secrecy. While multiple interpretations are possible, I suggest Coralee’s insistence on privacy regarding Ashley’s parentage can be viewed as a component of her activism as a mother. To reporters, she maintained her silence and stated, “We are her family. We are not perfect. But we will never accept that Ashley should have been treated in this manner” (Perkel, “My Skin is All Loose”).

Recasting the Good Mother

Numerous scholars argue that activist mothers redefine, rather than entrench, notions of proper parenting. Arguably, Coralee’s resistance can be better understood if analyzed through the work of scholars like Baydar and İvegen who show that the “exalted, almost sacred” figure of the mother helped Turkish protestors galvanize public and even political support (695). Melissa Wright queries whether contradictions emerge when radical activism is pinned on the typically stereotypical frame of mothering. At the same time, she recognizes that “mother-activism represents a powerful tool for women as they fight for social justice,” particularly in settings where women’s engagement in the public sphere is viewed as “socially perverse” (421). For Bejarano, Latin women recast the “good mother” to incorporate more radical behaviours. They were adamant that the “very loving and caring manner” they showed “by taking on their struggles against the state” coincided with effective parenting (131). Gülüsm Baydar and Berfin İvegen also present arguments favourable to protesting mothers. For Baydar and İvegen, woman-led political interventions illustrate the international potential of an emergent form of radical, feminist social protest that also seems to have found at least some expression in Coralee Smith’s protests, even if her claims were pressed in the media and before a coroner’s inquest rather than on the street.

Bromwich raises worrisome concerns that Coralee’s depictions made Ashley appear immature, overly-simplistic, and lacking her own personality. This characterization of a childlike Ashley denies the young woman’s resistance and agency (Bromwich). Furthermore, the depiction of Coralee Smith as the good mother may leave the racialized social boundaries of white settler society intact (117-57). By presenting Ashley as a child needing rescue, Coralee and others may have strengthened racialized, classed and gendered discourses that justify

violence against marginalized, imprisoned bodies, particularly those of the Indigenous women who are significantly overrepresented in carceral settings. Bromwich argues that Ashley's death may be characterized as exceptional rather than a product of the pervasiveness of necropolitical logics in prisons.

While acknowledging these concerns, I suggest that Coralee's management of the stigma commonly associated with being the parent of an incarcerated child has opened up space for other mothers to resist state injustice (Richie; Aiello and McQueeney). In particular, Coralee's references to Ashley as a child seemed to reinforce her as a victim, and therefore grievable and more compelling. As Coralee has stated, "she was my child. She was not a grown-up. Like, she'd never had sleepovers with her friends and never had gone to the movies by herself—she was just a young girl when she left home" (qtd. in Blanch). In this quote, Coralee seems aware that grounding her outrage in her status as a mother is the most likely way to having her story of injustice heard.

Importantly, Coralee Smith remains adamant her work was not for only Ashley. She voiced disappointment that Correctional Services of Canada failed to change its policies after Ashley's death. For her, the worry was not "just an Ashley story" (Stone). Instead, the concern was more expansive given that it was about "how our prisoners are being treated" or, in her correction, "mistreated." She urged officials to "do something" to address the dire custodial conditions, particularly the overuse of solitary confinement (Stone). In public statements, Coralee continually presents Ashley's death as an act of political violence with systemic implications beyond personal grief. In her 2015 conference presentation, Coralee insisted Canada is "torturing" its own "citizens" in reference to conditions in women's prisons ("Dying From Improvement"). She has used her notoriety to publicize other inmate deaths, including Kinew James, who died behind bars in 2013 from an apparent heart attack after calling for help, and Edward Snowshoe, who killed himself in 2010 after spending 162 days in segregation (Smith, "The Prison System").

Mothering Activism as the Radical Transformation of the Social Imaginary

Throughout her campaign for some measure of justice for her daughter and others incarcerated persons, Coralee modelled some of the power writers attribute to resistant Turkish mothers. Baydar and İvegen's scholarship helps to understand the significance of a mother's activism following Ashley's death in prison. These writers encourage us to "imagine the maternal-feminine" embodied by many mothers, including Coralee Smith, "not as an identity category but as a state of becoming and a line of flight toward the radical transformation of the social imaginary" (713). In her critiques of the prison policies that aided her daughter's demise, Coralee may be engaging in what

Margaret Burchianti describes as a “politics of the present” where the past is used to inform activism in the present (146).

At the 2015 conference, Coralee Smith described Ashley’s last drawing in her solitary cell. She stated that “a happy face” Ashley had etched with a yellow crayon prior to her death was left on the cell wall (Smith, “Dying from Improvement”). Arguably, this example shows ways that Coralee draws from the power of love to challenge state injustice and to prompt change to oppressive neoliberalist policies that render some lives less valuable (Burchianti, 133–150). By drawing attention to Coralee Smith’s experiences, this article may further understanding of mothering in and through the challenge of a fatality within state custody.

Part II. Mothering Activism and Incarceration

In the preceding discussion, I attempted to extricate an account of Coralee Smith’s activism from the larger, more prominent story of the mistreatment of Ashley Smith. This section seeks to make plain that the overuse of solitary confinement, worrying cases of deaths in custody, and deteriorating prison conditions are factors that may force more mothers of prisoners into activism to push for reform. Particular alarm is raised regarding women’s deaths in custody. This section highlights the importance of mothers who, like Coralee Smith, press for recognition and redress.

A Statistics Canada report *Women and the Criminal Justice System* found that that the majority of provincially and federally incarcerated women were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five (qtd. in Hotton Mahony 33). The relative youthfulness of the female inmate population means that many inmates have surviving parents, yet the strength of the bonds is unknown. According to the research, families provide vital supports during imprisonment and they are important to reintegration (Valera; O’Brien). Christy Visser’s research on prisoner reentry in Maryland revealed that families provide housing, emotional support, financial resources, and stability to returning prisoners.

Writing in 2007, Megan Comfort from the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, University of California, San Francisco, called for more research on the impact of incarceration on families and the inmate’s close, intimate circle. Comfort rejected the view that prisoners were “social isolates” lacking social networks (272). In contrast, she aimed to document “the profound transformative effects” that prison terms have on “families, intimates and neighbors” (272). She praised studies that were “mapping out” the scope of punishment on legally innocent people connected to offenders who were “made to alter their behavior, reorient their expectations, suffer changes in their health, and otherwise experience the social and economic repercussions of punitive sur-

veillance, confinement, and control” (272). In her view, research on the effects of incarceration must extend beyond the individual sentenced person to family, friends, and neighbours. Comfort stresses the need to document ways prisons affect family members, particularly after a death in custody.

Problematizing Women’s Incarceration

Given the harms associated with women’s imprisonment, it is possible to expand the scholarship on disasters that typically focuses on natural disasters. J.C. Gaillard and Fanny Navizet argue that prisons are social disasters based on their study of three prisons in France. They explore connections between prisons, prisoners, and vulnerability and natural and other hazards based on spatial, social, and political marginalization. Gaillard and Navizet’s informants stressed that the prime hazards for prisoners were “neither natural nor technological in nature” (40). The primary threats for incarcerated persons were “everyday in-prison hazards, i.e. health problems, cell fire, and physical violence and assaults” (40).

From a gendered perspective, the growing numbers of imprisoned women and the ongoing challenges they confront suggest that advocacy by mothers and others may be increasingly important. Scholars and advocates document the severe challenges female offenders confront. In 2015, Kim Pate described the rate of psychological, physical, and mental deterioration among female prisoners as astronomical when speaking to CBC reporters investigating women’s self-harming behaviour (qtd. in Harris). In a 2016 essay “How Canada’s Prisons are Failing Women (and Everyone Else),” Pate elaborated on the ways Canada’s prisons were increasingly wedded to punitive agendas (24-30). Pate urgently called for an end to over-incarceration as well as overreliance on segregation and other mentally harmful practices.

Pate’s concern seems to have been realized in news reports on recent deaths of women in custody, including the 2015 deaths of Veronica Park and Camille Strickland-Murphy at the Nova Institution for Women in Truro, Nova Scotia. Veronica Park, formerly of Corner Brook, Newfoundland, died after complaining of chest pains for days leading up to her death. Camille Strickland-Murphy was twenty-two years old and also from Newfoundland. She died by suicide in August 2015 while serving a sentence for armed robbery. After Camille’s death, her twin brother called for better supports for incarcerated women with mental health issues (CTV Atlantic). The passing of Kinew James at the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 2013 also posed a blow to her family given their hope she would soon be home. They demanded an inquest and full disclosure to discover why staff refused to respond promptly to her calls for help (Noël and Seglins).

The suicide of Terry Baker in 2016 at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener also demonstrates the need for greater therapeutic and preventative measures (Bueckert). Baker was a chronic self-harmer known to have suicidal potential. Terry was happier during her involvement in a pet therapy program at a Saskatchewan institution that granted inmates access to animals as supports. Because she repeatedly engaged in self-harming, Baker was evicted from the program, although it was a needed support. Notably, Terry Baker's death has been compared to that of Ashley Smith. Kim Pate stated she was "extremely concerned" about the commonalities between the two women's deaths (qtd in. Flanagan).

Recent Findings on Deaths in Custody

Writing in 2014, Daniel Antonowicz and John Winterdyk concluded that Canadian responses to deaths in custody had "considerable room for improvement" (100). An even more recent investigation further underscores the urgency of supporting families with incarcerated children. Howard Sapers of the Office of the Correctional Investigator released *In the Dark: An Investigation of Death in Custody Information Sharing and Disclosure Practices in Federal Corrections—Final Report* on 2 August 2016. Sapers summarized an investigation into the sixty-five deaths in federal custody that occurred between 2015 and 2016. The correctional investigator concluded families are typically ill-treated when a loved one dies while incarcerated. Next of kin said correctional agencies and staff were unhelpful after a loss, leading them to contact Sapers' office for assistance. Over half or 65 per cent of the deaths were attributed to "natural causes" yet Sapers found that the Correctional Services of Canada's interactions with families failed to display "fairness, openness, transparency, compassion and respect" (35). Sapers outlined reforms to support grieving families who reported further traumatization when a loved one's death in custody was handled callously.

Scrutinizing Coralee Smith's work to ensure her daughter's death was front page news seems particularly worthwhile in the current climate where the incarceration of women is increasing and where women's deaths in custody are news features. Analyzing mothering activism when a child is incarcerated or dies in custody may be helpful to populations generally stigmatized and overlooked, namely criminalized women and their families (Savarese). As her daughter's champion, Coralee Smith has fulfilled an important role, which has the potential to inspire others.

Conclusions

This text was premised on the view that Coralee Smith's activism has theo-

retical relevancy for mothering literature and feminist-oriented criminology. Throughout, I sought to break new ground by extracting Coralee Smith's story of advocacy for her daughter Ashley from the more prominent story of a tortured life and premature death. Effort was made to offer fresh insights to the mothering literature by focusing on activism by parents of criminalized children, rather than adding to the studies on criminalized mothers. Incarcerated mothers are the subject of recent scholarship, but little research is available on the experience of mothers who support their incarcerated daughters.

In this effort to theorize Coralee Smith's advocacy, I have drawn from some of the relevant literature on "motherist activism" on behalf of disappeared daughters in Latin America as well as Turkey. I placed Coralee's work on the spectrum of political acts where mothers used their maternal status and power to mobilize against violence and against the erasures that often followed the disappearances. Scholars writing about mothers' activism when loved ones vanish have shown ways that mothers effectively use the emotional appeal of their familial stature to evoke compassion and to break down spectator indifference. By finding commonality between the political resistance of women and a mother's outcry following a death in custody in Canada, I hoped to further the current understanding of mothering activism and to showcase lessons for mothers of incarcerated children, with a particular focus on activism following a death in custody.

Coralee's resistance makes it possible to have a glimpse of an Ashley Smith beyond the troublesome, troubled inmate. A poem written by Ashley was read by Coralee Smith at a 2015 conference. It reads:

Life is full of beauty—
Notice it
Notice the bumble bee;
The small child
And the smiling faces.
Smell the rain
And feel the wind
Live your life to the fullest potential
And fight for your dreams. (Smith, "Dying for Improvement")

This poem was included in the personal papers given to Ashley's family after her death. Having access to some of Ashley's final and most poetic words is worthy of note as an outcome of a mother's advocacy. This article showcased Coralee Smith's ongoing efforts to commemorate her daughter, Ashley, as a tribute to mothers around the world who have used their parental grief as a platform to demand change.

Works Cited

- Aiello, Brittnie, and Krista McQueeney. "How Can You Live without Your Kids? Distancing from and Embracing the Stigma of 'Incarcerated mother.'" *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, pp. 32-49.
- Anderson, A. Brenda, et al., editors. *Torn from Our Midst: Voices of Grief, Healing and Action from the Missing Indigenous Women Conference*. University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2010.
- Antonowicz, Daniel, and John Winterdyk. "A Review of Deaths in Custody in Three Canadian Provinces." *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 56, no.3, 2014, pp. 85-104.
- Balfour, Gillian. Book Review: *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Mothering*. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2016, pp. 109-112.
- Baydar, Gülsüm, and Berfin İvegen. "Territories, Identities, and Thresholds: The Saturday Mothers Phenomenon in İstanbul." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2006, pp. 689-715.
- Bejarano, Cynthia L. "Las super madres de Latino America: Transforming motherhood by challenging violence in Mexico, Argentina, and El Salvador." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2002, pp. 126-50.
- Blanch, Vanessa. "Ashley Smith's Mother Says Little Has Changed Since Daughter Died in Prison." *CBC*, 25 Oct. 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/coralee-smith-ashley-prison-mental-health-1.3820147. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Bouvard, Marguerite Guzman. *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.
- Bromwich, Rebecca. *Looking for Ashley: Re-reading What the Smith Case Reveals about the Governance of Girls, Mothers, and Families in Canada*. Demeter Press, 2015.
- Bromwich, Rebecca, and Jennifer Kilty. "Introduction: Law, Vulnerability, and Segregation: What Have We Learned from Ashley Smith's Carceral Death?" *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / Revue Canadienne Droit Et Société*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 157-64.
- Bueckert, Kate. "Terry Baker Felt Guilty 'Every Single Day' for Murder She Helped Commit, Friend Says." *CBC*, 8 July 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/terry-baker-suicide-grand-valley-institute-friend-1.3669077. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Burchianti, Margaret E. "Building Bridges of Memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Cultural Politics of Maternal Memories." *History and Anthropology*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2004, pp. 133-50.
- Canadian Press. "Ashley Smith 'Death Video' Can Be Made Public." *Falconers*, 23 Oct. 2012, www.falconers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AshleySmith-

- deathvideocanbemadepublicinquestrules.pdf. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "No One Cared," Says Mother of Woman Who Strangled Self in Prison." CBC, 4 Mar., www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/millennials-rural-newfoundland-trend-life-style-bonavista-trinity-1.4344151. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Comfort, Megan. "Punishment Beyond the Legal Offender." *Annu. Rev. Law Soc. Sci.*, vol. 3, 2007, pp. 271-296.
- Corrections Services of Canada. *Response to the Coroner's Inquest Touching the Death of Ashley Smith*. Government of Canada, 2014.
- CTV Atlantic, "'Like Losing a Limb': Twin Brother Calls for Change after Sister's Death in N.S. Prison." *CTV Atlantic*, 7 Aug. 2015, atlantic.ctvnews.ca/like-losing-a-limb-twin-brother-calls-for-change-after-sister-s-death-in-n-s-prison-1.2507614. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Flanagan, Ryan. "GVI Inmate Dies after Being Found Unresponsive in Cell." *CTV Kitchener*, 6 July 2016, kitchener.ctvnews.ca/gvi-inmate-dies-after-being-found-unresponsive-in-cell-1.2975995. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Gaillard, J. C., and Fanny Navizet. "Prisons, prisoners and disaster." *International journal of disaster risk reduction* 1 (2012): 33-43.
- Harris, Kathleen. "Self-Harm Incidents among Female Prisoners Highest in Prairies." *CBC*, 18 Mar. 2015, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/self-harm-incidents-among-female-prisoners-highest-in-prairies-1.3000397. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Hawkes, Martine. "What Is Recovered." *Media Culture Journal* vol. 11, no. 6, 2008, journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/92. Accessed Oct. 9 2017.
- Hawkes, Martine. "Containing Testimony: Archiving Loss after Genocide." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2012, pp. 935-45.
- Hotton Mahony, Tina. *Women and the Criminal Justice System*. Statistics Canada, 30 Nov. 2015, www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11416-eng.htm. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Karaman, Emine Rezzan. "Remember, S/he Was Here Once Mothers Call for Justice and Peace in Turkey." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2016, pp. 382-410.
- Landertinger, Laura, C.L. "Settler Colonialism and Carceral Control of Indigenous Mothers and their Children: Child Welfare and the Prison System." *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Motherhood*, Joanne Minaker and Bryan Hogeveen, Demeter, 2014, pp. 59-87. Print.
- Brigitte, Noël, and Dave Seglins, "Prisoner Death Triggers Call for Public Inquiry," *CBC News* .23 January 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prisoner-death-triggers-call-for-public-inquiry-1.1301336>. Accessed 9

- Oct. 2017.
- O'Brien, Patricia. "Just Like Baking a Cake': Women Describe the Necessary Ingredients for Successful Reentry After Incarceration." *Families in Society*, vol. 82, no. 3, 2001, pp. 287-295.
- Pate, Kim. "How Canada's Prisons Are Failing Women (and Everyone Else)." *Herizons*, vol. 29, no 4, 2016, pp. 24-30. Print.
- Perkel, Colin. "Ashley Smith a 'Large Tyrannical Child,' Prison Psychiatrist Says." *The Globe and Mail*, 25 Mar. 2013, beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ashley-smith-a-large-tyrannical-child-prison-psychiatristsays/article10281799/?ref. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Perkel, Colin. "Inquest Shown Images of Ashley Smith Tranquilized, Duct-Taped by Prison Guards." *The Globe and Mail*, 31 Oct. 2012, beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/inquest-shown-images-of-ashley-smith-tranquilized-duct-taped-by-prisonguards/article4805438/?ref. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Perkel, Colin. "My Skin is All Loose': Ashley Smith Told Mother in Final Visit." *The Globe and Mail*, 21 Feb. 2013, beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/my-skin-is-all-loose-ashley-smith-told-mother-in-final-visit/article8957193/?ref. Accessed. 9 Oct. 2017.
- Perkel, Colin. "Ashley Smith Looked 'Hopeless' Weeks before Her Death in Isolation Cell, Inquest Told." *CTV News*, 15 Oct. 2013, www.ctvnews.ca/canada/ashley-smith-looked-hopeless-weeks-before-her-death-in-isolation-cell-inquest-told-1.1497753. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Richard, Bernard. "The Ashley Smith Report." New Brunswick Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate. 2008.
- Richie, Beth E. "Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities: Findings from Life History Interviews." *Crime & Delinquency*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2001, 368-89.
- Sapers, Howard. *A Legacy of Missed Opportunities: The Case of Ashley Smith*. Office of the Correctional Investigator, 23 Nov. 2011, www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/comm/sp-all/sp-all20111123-eng.aspx. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Sapers, Howard. *In the Dark: An Investigation of Death in Custody Information Sharing and Disclosure Practices in Federal Corrections—Final Report*. Office of the Correctional Investigator. Office of the Correctional Investigator. 2 Aug. 2016, www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/oth-aut/oth-aut20160802-eng.aspx.
- Savarese, Josephine L. "Theorizing Soft Criminalization in the Child Welfare System, An Analysis of Re S.F." *Criminalized Mothers, Criminalizing Mothering*, edited by Joanne Minaker and Bryan Hogeveen, Demeter, 2015, pp. 88-111.
- Smith, Coralee. "The Prison System Failed My Daughter. Ashley's Ordeal Will Be Repeated." *The Globe and Mail*, 12 Dec. 2014, beta.theglobeandmail.com.

- com/globe-debate/the-prison-system-failed-my-daughter-ashleys-ordeal-will-be-repeated/article22066223/. Accessed 9 Oct. 2013.
- Smith, Coralee. "Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody." *A Canadian Crisis: Criminalization & Imprisonment of Indigenous Women & those with Disabling Mental Health Issues*. College of Law, University of Saskatchewan, 2015.
- Stone, Laura. "Corrections Canada Won't End Solitary Confinement Following Ashley Smith's Death." *Global News*, 11 Dec. 2014, globalnews.ca/news/1721421/corrections-canada-set-to-respond-to-ashley-smith-recommendations/. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Taber, Jane. "Ashley Smith Is Finally 'at Peace,' Mother Says after Homicide Ruling." *The Globe and Mail*, 19 Dec. 2013, beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/ashley-smith-is-finally-at-peace-mother-says-after-homicide-ruling/article16058140/?ref. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Valera, Pamela, et al. "Exploring Kinship and Social Support in Women With Criminal Justice Backgrounds." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2015, pp. 278-95.
- Vincent, Donovan. "Ashley Smith's Mother Believes Daughter Died from Homicide." *Toronto Star*. 28 Nov. 2013, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/11/28/ashley_smiths_mother_believes_daughter_died_from_homicide.html. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Vincent, Donovan. "Questions Resurface about Ashley Smith's Birth Mother." *Toronto Star*, 15 Apr. 2013, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/04/15/ashley_smith_inquest_questions_about_identity_of_teens_mother_resurface.html. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Visher, Christy. "Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Maryland Pilot Study: Findings from Baltimore." *Urban*, Jan. 2004, www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/42841/410974-Returning-Home-Understanding-the-Challenges-of-Prisoner-Reentry.PDF. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Wright, Melissa W. "Urban Geography Plenary Lecture—Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico." *Urban Geography*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2007, pp. 401-25.
- Zlomislic, Diana. "From Generous Girl to 'Caged Animal.'" *The Toronto Star*, 10 Oct. 2009, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2009/10/10/from_generous_girl_to_caged_animal.html. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.
- Zlomislic, Diane, and Donovan Vincent. "Excerpt: The Life and Death of Ashley Smith." *The Toronto Star*. 15 Dec. 2013, www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/12/15/excerpt_the_life_and_death_of_ashley_smith.html. Accessed 9 Oct. 2017.