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## Locked Up Underground: Kay Boyle and Prisons

Thomas Austenfeld

Kay Boyle's characteristic combination of literature and political activism extended through her entire life. Her final novel, *The Underground Woman*, published in 1975, should be seen together with her 1977 essay, "Report from Lock-Up," as documents reflecting on her prison experiences subsequent to her participation in anti-Vietnam War protests in the late 1960s. Boyle's concern with prisons covers the period from 1967 to 1977 and includes essays about Alcatraz, Attica, and San Francisco, in which she discusses literal and metaphorical imprisonment as well as other forms of deprivation of liberty. This essay situates Boyle's "prison writings" in the larger contexts of the American literary tradition and places them in relation to today's concerns raised in connection with academic efforts to bring literacy to prison inmates in the United States.

We generally think of modernist authors as devoted to supreme aesthetic pursuits. When these authors stray into the political arena, as T.S. Eliot did at times or Ezra Pound did in Italy, the results are on occasion distasteful, on occasion downright outrageous. A number of American modernist women writers, however, successfully combined a life of writing with a life of political engagement in progressive or humanitarian causes.<sup>1</sup> Least well known among these to date, somewhat unaccountably, is Kay Boyle (1902-1992). Even if her early novels *Plagued by the Nightingale* (1931) and *Death of a Man* (1936) exist in reprints and are oc-

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<sup>1</sup> For two very different introductions to this theme, see Austenfeld, *American Women Writers*, and Lesinska.

asionally quoted, and even if her work is now about to re-enter the literary consciousness of American undergraduates, thanks to the inclusion of her signature story "The White Horses of Vienna" in the seventh edition of volume D of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Mary Loeffelholz, the Boyle canon as a whole remains underappreciated.<sup>2</sup> Kay Boyle's particular way of marrying literature and political activism consistently characterized her work from the 1920s to the 1980s. One of her least-known novels, *The Underground Woman* (1975), deserves to be re-read in a new critical context that is available to us now, in 2008. This context is circumscribed by fresh discussions about the relationship between literature and incarceration, focused in the May, 2008 issue of *PMLA* entitled "Prisons, Activism, and the Academy." As a meditation upon various forms of imprisonment, ranging from Boyle's personal experience of jail time resulting from her having participated in an anti-Vietnam War protest to the more subtle forms of imprisonment that a commune can provide, *The Underground Woman* has more to say to us today than when it appeared in 1975, when even Boyle herself thought "in a way it's not a good book" (Spanier 203).

Kay Boyle's life of writing and political activism developed over the course of the twentieth century in the cities and countries in which modernism shaped its aesthetic assumptions – places where Boyle just somehow managed to be when it mattered most. An expatriate through much of her early career, she was friends with William Carlos Williams and Samuel Beckett, lived in France, England, Austria, and Germany from 1923 to 1941, married first a Frenchman, then an American who had previously been married to Peggy Guggenheim, finally an Austrian nobleman, had six children with two of her husbands plus another man and raised a whole lot more, and published stories and novels continuously from the 1920s to the 1980s. This woman, frail in stature and famous for her large earrings, was praised in 1931 by Katherine Anne Porter as "example to the young," was victimized by loyalty-security hearings in 1952, taught at San Francisco State University from 1962 to 1979, and protested extensively against the Vietnam War. Active in many genres, Boyle wrote short fiction, manifestoes, novels, essays, poems, and memoirs. In brief, Boyle considered writing, personal integrity, and political activism as inseparable.<sup>3</sup>

From 1967 to 1977, Kay Boyle engaged intellectually and physically with prisons. After protesting against the Vietnam War by picketing the Oakland Induction Center in October and again in December 1967, she

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<sup>2</sup> See also *Kay Boyle for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Austenfeld.

<sup>3</sup> The biographical summary in this paragraph is paraphrased from my forthcoming entry "Kay Boyle" in Blackwell's *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Fiction*.

was placed in lock-up for several days. In 1969, when Native American activists took over the abandoned Alcatraz Island, site of a former high-security prison, she helped supply them with provisions. In her 1970 essay published in *The New Republic*, "A Day on Alcatraz with the Indians," Boyle describes how she spent Christmas Day with those who squatted on that rock in the Bay: "No place in these United States could be more appropriate as symbol of the Indian's imprisonment on his own soil" (*Words* 105). The former high-security prison had become a dismal emblem of a reservation for America's aboriginal inhabitants. The Attica prison riots in New York state in 1971, which left 39 persons dead – 29 prisoners and 10 corrections officers or civilian employees – caused her to speak out in the *New Republic* in an essay she titled sarcastically "The Crime of Attica" (see *Words* 109-117). In another essay, her most sardonic piece from this time, titled "Seeing the Sights in San Francisco" and published in 1967 in *The Progressive*, she uses the conceit of a tourist-guide essay to take visitors around her city. The notion of imprisonment is metaphorical in this text, as Boyle contemplates caskets and graves. At Golden Gate Cemetery, men are interred who just a few weeks before had walked the streets of Hanoi. At Travis Air Force Base where, 24 hours per day, Starlifter airplanes arrive from Southeast Asia with corpses packed in ice, our tour guide takes cold comfort in the fact that the containers for the corpses, "– and this is reassuring confirmation of the rigid economy practiced by our military – have been in use since the Korean War" (*Words* 183-84). In these pieces, Boyle employs the political potential of that familiar American stand-by, the essay, modeled in her own century by H.L. Mencken and in the preceding century by Henry David Thoreau, whose stinging indictment of the so-called compromise of 1850, "Slavery in Massachusetts," made the political personal. The common denominator of Boyle's essays from these years is the sense of imprisonment, whether that of Indians at Alcatraz, rebelling inmates at Attica, or American citizens trapped in an impersonal war machinery. Identity politics is necessarily seen here through the lens of the prison, years before the dramatic increases in prison population and the length of mandatory sentences was to become social policy in the United States.

Yet Boyle also turned to fiction in these years to lend expression to two different kinds of states of imprisonment or impediments to self-determination. One such impediment, in her view, is a government that imprisons protesters, another is a commune that imprisons and abuses the minds and bodies of its willing neophytes. Boyle thus mingled literature and political activism in her curious and somewhat mysterious 1975 *roman à clef*, *The Underground Woman*. Drawing on her own imprisonment experience in 1967 and, in part, her daughter's "imprisonment" in a

commune, in 1968,<sup>4</sup> Boyle here returned to a method and a literary gesture, the mingling of fiction and activism, that had been her hallmark in World War II novels from *1939* via *Primer for Combat* to the overtly propagandistic *Avalanche* and *A Frenchman Must Die*. Her last novel, *The Underground Woman*, must also be read in conjunction with Boyle's essay "Report from Lock-Up," most widely published in a 1977 volume of four essays called *Four Visions of America* – the other essays were by Thomas Sanchez, Erica Jong, and Henry Miller. Boyle captures the reader with her very first sentence: "It may be that none of us can ever get out of the solitary confinement we've condemned ourselves to (out of fear, out of pride, out of loneliness) until we find ourselves in actual prisons of iron and stone" ("Report" 10).

For five days (though she did not know in advance how long it would be), Kay Boyle was placed with two other women in a prison with only a grey shift, a pair of old tennis shoes, a cake of soap, and a suicide-proof toothbrush. For five days, Boyle lived in conditions that served, as she says in her opening, to get her "out of the solitary confinement" she invokes in the opening sentence into "a liberation" (10). Mindful of Bob Dylan's lyrics (from the 1971 song "George Jackson"), Boyle recalls:

Sometimes I think this whole world  
Is one big prison yard.  
Some of us are prisoners  
The rest of us are guards. (see 11)

Boyle's intertextual references link her texts from this period thematically. George Jackson was the Black Panther who was killed in San Quentin prison when allegedly trying to escape – an incident that led directly to the Attica Prison riots in September of that year (*Words* 109–117). Boyle saw herself participating, as a writer, in a set of events that

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<sup>4</sup> It is at this moment difficult to reconstruct the exact dates of some of the historical circumstances, because Boyle intermingled several events into her fictional account. According to Spanier, Boyle was arrested in October 1967 (203); Boyle's "Report from Lock-Up" speaks about "that evening in 1968" (119). She mentions to her lawyer that she has been "in lock-up for five days and nights" (149), whereas Athena, the protagonist of *The Underground Woman*, serves a "ten-day sentence" (Spanier 203). Chris André, on the other hand, reports a total of 31 days of arrest for Boyle (331). Boyle's San Francisco house was taken over by members of Mel Lyman's commune in the fall of 1970 (Spanier 205) at a time when her son Ian had joined the group as well – his sister Faith was already deeply involved with the group and had married one of its leaders, David Gude. The novel's account focuses on the daughter's role in the takeover, in part because mothers and daughters, Callisto and Calliope, Demeter and Persephone, are important ingredients of its allegorical apparatus.

connected her with the political questions of the day, whether it was Vietnam, the social unrest of the Civil Rights Movement, the aftermath of the 1968 riots across American cities, or the notion of imprisonment as reflected in Bob Dylan's lyrics.

In "Report from Lock-Up," Boyle uses her encounters in prison to anatomize American society ruthlessly. In the first cell she shares with other women, two prostitutes discuss going to the Yukon territories once they are released. One, a Canadian, anticipates the lonely men there to be easy prey. The other, from Brooklyn, Boyle surmises by her accent, is not so sure about joining her companion in the cold Canadian North: "I'm American. Always have been. I love every state in the union, only some are better than others for professionals" (13). This bitter, if hilarious, send-up is the first in a series of satirical comments on patriotism in this essay. A second cell, the next day, brings Boyle into contact with a young woman who is seven months pregnant. Her baby's father is in the adjoining male cell block. Both are imprisoned for "possession," a charge Boyle effectively ridicules by pointing out that these people have never possessed anything at all (19). Using the power of metaphor, Boyle comments on the hot summers of the sixties and seventies when black neighborhoods burned in major American cities, by recalling how, during an earlier prison visit, she was given trowels and scissors to prune and split the iris plants: "It was here I had learned that once every two years this must be done to iris plants so they don't end up strangling one another in the crowded ghettos of their beds" (24). She considers various stories she might tell the girl in order to offer her a perspective on her prison stay. She thinks about the Bird Man of Alcatraz and about the smuggling of Chinese workers into San Francisco a hundred years before. She thinks about the years that Alexander Berkman, Lithuanian activist, lover of Emma Goldman and failed assassin of Henry Clay Frick, spent in prison. By evoking these historical, counter-cultural figures and their personal versions of patriotism, the essay becomes a vindication of immigration, the right to think radical thoughts and to perform radical action, while all of these activities are linked to the notion of imprisonment. Boyle next recalls Dudley Field Malone, who resigned from Woodrow Wilson's administration in protest when Wilson decided to jail women who demanded the right to vote. By strings of associations, the "report from lock-up" becomes a catalogue of the extent to which countless Americans are "locked up" in their limiting conditions.

Imprisonment is a mechanism of control that can manifest itself in different ways. In what is probably the most stunning scene of "Report from Lock-Up," another of Boyle's cellmates, a mostly illiterate black woman, prevails upon Boyle to write a letter to her lawyer on her behalf.



Once Boyle admits that she is incarcerated for protesting against the Vietnam war, the black woman is outraged: “‘Against the war in Vietnam!’ she said, her voice gone high in incredulity. ‘Ain’t you never heard of national honor?’ she asked” (26). In a single image, Boyle has highlighted the plight of underprivileged, woefully undereducated black Americans of her generation who are yet gullible consumers of jingoist rhetoric in a time of war. Boyle’s reportage here encapsulates the nexus of poverty, oppression, and patriotic indoctrination that marked the late sixties.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of imprisonment thus runs like a *fil rouge* through Boyle’s work of the sixties and seventies. Boyle’s major novel touching on all the themes evoked in her essays, *The Underground Woman*, can be reread in 2008 in a context that is quite different from the one in which it first appeared. *The Underground Woman* was originally seen as a failure, and Boyle voiced her own dissatisfaction with it, explaining that “she was not sufficiently detached from its conflict to make it effective fiction” (Spanier 203). Both contemporary reviewers and more recent critics considered Boyle’s combination of fiction and activism marred by her somewhat inept handling of the unusual device of allegory which she employs as a thin shield between her autobiographical experiences and the plot she fashions out of them. The protagonist, whom she calls Athena, is, like Boyle, widowed (though younger than she by 20 years), introvert (though observant), teaches at San Francisco State (though not writing but classics), spends her time in prison with a singer and her mother whom she calls Callisto and Calliope (modeled on Joan Baez and her mother), and has her house taken over by a militant commune (though in the novel she is present when it happens, whereas Boyle was teaching at Hollins College in Virginia at the time this happened to her) (see Spanier 205). The allegory is weighted down by its mythological vehicle; it is heavy-handed and inconsistent at times, point of view shifts, the plot seems to get out of control with the apparently extraneous episode of the commune invasion. Yet such a critique need not be the last word about *The Underground Woman*. The governing emotion of the novel is the sense of dual imprisonment, that in jail and that in the commune which the narrator’s daughter has joined and to whose leader she has given her money and, fatefully, the key to her mother’s house. While Boyle herself may not have been sufficiently detached from the plot, our own temporal distance of more than a generation can offer a different focus on the text. *The Underground Woman* should first be seen

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<sup>5</sup> For a historical account of women’s prisons that helps provide a context for Boyle’s narrative, see Zedner.

in the multiple contexts of American and other national literary histories and then in the more recent context of “prison lit.”

In adopting the persona of a writer and teacher who experiences incarceration, Boyle highlights the connection between prisons and *writing*, a tradition which extends through several canonical texts in American literature right up to the present. In the publication year of the novel (1975), Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, brought the history of imprisonment to a wide audience. Foucault begins his book with an unforgettable, searing account of the public torturing and quartering of a parricide, a certain Damien in Paris in 1757. The punishment performed on Damien’s body by the Parisian authorities links up in meaningful ways with examples of corporal discipline from American literature which form the implied background of Boyle’s novel inasmuch as they jointly thematize writing and prison.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison.

Thus begins chapter one of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850 but set in the first generation of the Puritan immigrants of the 1620s.<sup>6</sup> As Hester emerges from prison into the glaring Puritan light of day, it becomes clear that the letter that punishes her – not just the letter of the law, but the letter affixed to her breast – is written not in the hands of her judges but in her own: through her art as a seamstress, Hester has re-written her judgment into self-expression, has made herself a readable emblem, has created art. In the context of his discussion of corporal punishment as a defining social issue of the mid-nineteenth century and especially within the emerging culture of domesticity in the 1840s and early 1850s, Richard Brodhead noticed “the striking fact about *The Scarlet Letter* is that it is almost exclusively the Puritan disciplinary system . . . not its practice of piety . . . that Hawthorne concerns himself with” (77). Other key mid-nineteenth-century texts foreground the topos of imprisonment as well as the practice of whipping with great clarity. Brodhead asserts that “whipping *means* slavery” and that discussions of whipping at mid-century, even if ostensibly linked to the context of the navy, in reality emblemize slavery. “Read in this light,” Brodhead continues,

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<sup>6</sup> I owe the suggestion of invoking Hawthorne to Waxler (678).



Hawthorne's whole project in *The Scarlet Letter* could be thought of as an attempt to weigh the methods and powers of a newer against an older disciplinary order, by juxtaposing a world of corporal correction (embodied in the Puritans' punishment of Hester) and a world of correction-by-interiority (embodied in Chillingworth and Dimmesdale). (78)

Clearly, prisons were topical in the 1850s. Herman Melville's *Bartleby* suffers forms of imprisonment ranging from psychological and social isolation to a pauper's death in a jail appropriately named The Tombs. When the narrating lawyer – an officer of the law who unites in his person the practice of writing and the imposition of punishment – vacates his premises in consternation over his own inability to “discipline” *Bartleby* into working by what Brodhead might call “disciplinary intimacy” (70), all furniture in the room is removed piece by piece until *Bartleby* stands exposed, metaphorically stripped, ready to be flogged:

Throughout, the scrivener remained standing behind the screen, which I directed to be removed the last thing. It was withdrawn; and being folded up like a huge folio, left him the motionless occupant of a naked room. (28)

The lawyer leaves the work of expelling and imprisoning *Bartleby* to others. Mark Twain, looking back at the early 1840s in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), similarly offers a final indictment of slavery in the charade of Jim's imprisonment at the hands of Tom Sawyer in the Phelps' cabin. Had Jim only known he was free – a fact Tom cruelly withholds – he need never have suffered all the indignities the boy practices because they were *written in books* that Tom mistook for reality. Analogously, had slaves known the full extent of the evil of the “peculiar institution” – knowledge cruelly withheld from them by the interdiction against learning how to read – the system of chattel slavery might not have lasted as long as it did. Unsurprisingly, Brodhead devotes a major portion of his essay to a discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which focuses on the question of whipping like no other work of its time.

In colonial times, the length and intensity of corporal punishment, sometimes administered by the lash, took the place of long prison sentences. Imprisonment as such was never of long duration in the colonies. Punishment instead was meted out through

mechanisms of shame (the stock and public cage), banishment, and of course, the gallows. What was not on the list was imprisonment. . . . The primary goal in dispensing one or another of these penalties was deterrence, in the hope that the punishment would serve to keep the offender from repeating the crime in this particular community. (Rothman 101)

By the time Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States in 1831 and 1832, the central mission with which he had been entrusted by the French government was an inspection of the American prison system then being reformed. "Jacksonian Americans took enormous pride in their prisons, were eager to show them off to European visitors," (Rothman 100) and embraced the notion of rehabilitation – to be achieved by long prison sentences served in single cells and with quasi-military order in dress, eating habits, movement in shuffling files of prisoners from one place to another, constant work, and total quiet (see Rothman 106, 108-110 *passim*) – as the tool to restore and to inculcate a sense of order in the prisoners. The 1835 and 1840 publications of volumes I and II, respectively, of *Democracy in America*, the book by which de Tocqueville is now remembered, occurred *after* the submission of his and Gustave de Beaumont's original report to the French government entitled *Du système pénitentiaire aux États-Unis et de son application en France* (1833). In the context of a critical and narrative arc from de Tocqueville's report on American prisons via mid-nineteenth-century literary texts all the way to Foucault's study, I see the opportunity to rehabilitate – no pun intended – Boyle's novel and to appreciate it as a member of that important line of literary contributions concerned with imprisonment and literacy.

Imprisonment and literacy are intimately connected not just across the American literary tradition, but in other national literatures as well. Writing for the prisoner is a means of communicating while held *incommunicado*. Writing in solitary confinement is a means of inventing a conversation partner to overcome depressing loneliness. Writing is a furtive connection to the outside world, whether in the form of communication with lawyers, appeals to judges, or just desperate missives thrown out of dungeons in bottles. Writing subverts the isolation intended by the society that incarcerates. "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons," Fyodor Dostoevsky said in *The House of the Dead* (1862). Alexander Solzhenitsyn will always be remembered for his literary evocations of Soviet prison camps. Stefan Zweig's *Schachnovelle* thematizes prisons and writing. Henry David Thoreau memorialized for all time his one night in the Concord jail as the defiant expression of a solitary person's stance against the taxing power of the state which violates his principles. More forcefully yet, in "Slavery in Massachusetts," he portrays the citizen of his state as being prisoner to the federal "Compromise of 1850" which effectively turns them into slaveholders the moment they agree to hold and return a fugitive Southern slave. In Franz Kafka's novella "In the Penal Colony," written in 1914

and published in 1919<sup>7</sup>, an infernal torture machine stencils the sentence on the condemned man's body before letting him die, suggesting a connection between writing and prison that literalizes (at least in English, though not as fully in Kafka's original German) the notion of the death sentence. Kafka's original text suggests more forcefully that the inscription individualizes the condemned, and that the price for individualization in a faceless modern society is death.<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the rehabilitative potential of literature itself in a prison setting has gained interest in the academy, and the literary work of prisoners themselves has increasingly entered the public consciousness.<sup>9</sup> This acknowledgement of the therapeutic power of the word is the latest development in the history of penology which Foucault describes as a gradual removal of the idea of compensatory suffering in favor of rehabilitation. However, the policy of shaming prisoners is still alive and well in some parts of the United States. Driving up and down the highways of Georgia and Alabama, I have come across chain gangs – groups of men, and occasionally women, in striped suits, sometimes shackled, occasionally walking singly and at other times loosely chained into a group – who pick up trash by the roadside while an officer guards them with a rifle. The ghost of Hester Prynne is never far.

The May 2008 issue of *PMLA*, right down to its cover art, is devoted to questions surrounding what it calls America's "prison-industrial complex" (*Editor's Column*, Hartnett 561). Authors ask, "What is the academy's responsibility to the men, women, and children who live behind bars? What is its responsibility to those who are released?" (545). Their answers invoke the notion of empowerment through reading and the injection of some degree of humanity into an inhumane prison system. Remarkably, many of the writers measure the present-day situation in American prisons against that around 1975 – not so incidentally the publication year of both Kay Boyle's *The Underground Woman* and Michel Foucault's landmark study. H. Bruce Franklin writes: "[I]n 1975, there were 360,000 people incarcerated in the nation's jails and prisons. Today there are more than 2.4 million – almost twenty-five percent of all the prisoners in the world. During these thirty-three years, this country has constructed on average one new prison every week. Many states spend annually more on prisons than they do on higher education" (643). And Ruby C. Tapia adds, *à propos* of women and prison: "Since 1978, the population of women prisoners in the United States has increased by

<sup>7</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/In\\_der\\_Strafkolonie](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_der_Strafkolonie). 12 October 2008.

<sup>8</sup> See Holquist for a differing interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> The entire May 2008 issue of *PMLA* is eloquent testimony to this new interest. See also Scheffler.

four hundred percent" (684) and cites Amnesty International with the figure that "nearly 70% of women in prison are African American or Latina" (685). Kay Boyle's brief encounter with life as an inmate in the late 1960s has become a way of life for countless women.

Whereas in the late 1960s, "prison literature" such as Boyle's essay "Report from Lock-Up" and her novel *The Underground Woman* were the literary result of the badge of courage that Boyle and others had earned in opposing the war in Vietnam with their bodies in front of the induction center, prison literature in 2008, judging by the articles in *PMLA*, is an attempt to fill the lives of inmates, who serve ever longer sentences, with an offering of cultural nourishment in the form of texts and, at the same time, allow them to express themselves literarily or through theater performances. Yet in both cases, an examination of prisons becomes a metonymic examination of America. The country that has written "liberty" on its banners is necessarily particularly prone to having its prisons examined.

Re-reading *The Underground Woman* not primarily as a failed allegory but as a fictionalized version of "Report from Lock-Up," that is, as a literary indictment of a society that divides itself into one half prisoners, one half guards, opens up the text for seeing afresh the hypocrisies that generate its narrative tensions. Placing Vietnam protesters in temporary lock-up is not an act of rehabilitation partaking of the perfectibility philosophy of Jacksonian America. It resembles more closely the Puritan practice of public shaming, yet, like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, it ironically does "not do its office"<sup>10</sup> – at least not the one intended by the authorities. Once the protesters are released, they can make use of the significant lessons they have learned about the ways in which imprisonment affects the spirit. The character of Athena, for example, has developed a concomitantly greater ability to unmask the hypocrisy of the commune to which her daughter has fallen prey. Kay Boyle herself had lived in Raymond Duncan's Neuilly commune near Paris in the late 1920s; her 1934 novel *My Next Bride* provides the fictionalized record of that experience. Yet Athena eventually forcefully resists the takeover of her house by members of the group that her daughter has joined. In the climactic chapter of *The Underground Woman*, Boyle forces her readers to see the strained mother-daughter relationship that has led to the present impasse in a setting that evokes multiple contexts. Athena is torn between her motherly loyalty to her daughter and her outrage at the possibility of losing her home to invading squatters from the commune. Her black neighbor, Luchies McDoniel, resolves the impasse by his magiste-

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<sup>10</sup> I am paraphrasing Hawthorne's famous sentence from ch XIII of *The Scarlet Letter*, on which Sacvan Bercovitch bases his 1991 study, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*.

rial presence, as he urges Athena to perceive, through him, that imprisonment of any sort, whether it be the shadow of historical slavery, modern imprisonment, or commune membership against one's will, is always wrong. Athena has just endured a confrontation with one of the male group members who struck her across the face and broke her earring. Luchies asks why she didn't strike him back: "Because I knew it wasn't Lucky's hand striking me. I couldn't bear it any more because it was Melanie's hand" (238). Imagining that her daughter struck her, Athena is momentarily paralyzed. Luchies breaks Athena's self-preserving resistance wide open, as Boyle pulls out all the metaphorical stops:

"Look at me," he repeated, asking for nothing except her recognition that his eyes were swollen with the grief of his own indelible memories, with the outrages to flesh and spirit that had shaped his life, swollen in perpetual mourning for the *shackles*, the *irons*, that had been put on him by the time and the place in which he had lived, by the final loneliness that *locked* him in *solitary* now. (238-239, emphases mine)

As Luchies and Athena kiss and bridge their historical divide, bringing their respective "solitaries" to an end, a new decisiveness enters their actions. They engineer an eviction of the commune's members and Athena effects a reunion with a substitute daughter, her former cellmate Ann. A full reconciliation of Boyle with her own children was still a long way off at this time.<sup>11</sup>

*The Underground Woman*, a fictionalized memoir, was Kay Boyle's last major book. In her career, it holds the place that *The Never-Ending Wrong* (1977), a recollection of the 1927 Sacco and Vanzetti case and thus another prison book, holds in the career of Katherine Anne Porter, the older writer who had been among the first to praise Boyle in print. Much has happened to "prison lit" since the days when those two mighty American women writers sharpened their pens to indict the American prison system. In the waning days of her life, in a retirement home in Mill Valley, Boyle still led a local chapter of Amnesty International. I can't help but wonder what these two, Porter and Boyle, might have said in response to the national shame we now connect with the words Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.

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<sup>11</sup> But read, for contrast, Faith Gude's chapter about her mother in Austenfeld (ed.), *Kay Boyle for the Twenty-First Century* (169-171). Gude is reportedly working on her own narrative about her years in the commune, which she left only recently.



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