

# Outlaw girls escape from prison: gender, resistance and playfulness

*Fabienne Emmerich, Keele University, UK*

## Corresponding author

Fabienne Emmerich, School of Law, Keele University, Newcastle-under-Lyme, ST5 5NA, UK  
Email: f.emmerich@keele.ac.uk

## Abstract

Prison resistance practices are increasingly understood as gendered and linked to subjectivation. This article builds on this growing body of knowledge, but with a different and largely under explored focus, namely the confrontational resistance practices of women political prisoners. The objective is to explore how gendered resistance practices disrupt dominant constructions of gender through the lens of the hidden preparations and implementation of a historical women's escape. This is done through a gendered analysis of narrative and auto/biographical material of the 1976 prison break in Germany, in which four women of the Red Army Faction (RAF) and June 2nd Movement (J2M) escaped from the women's prison in West Berlin. Drawing on the works of poststructuralist feminists, the article expands our theoretical understanding of resistance to include the recognition of playfulness and laughter in the processes of subjectivation. It argues that opening up gendered resistance practices to play and laughter, lets us see the women's escape as a subversive reversal of the heroic, masculine prison break, in which their subjectivity as revolutionary violent women is revealed.

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## **Introduction**

Prison resistance practices are increasingly understood as gendered and linked to subjectivation. Subjectivation, in Foucault's theory of power, are the processes that transform people into subjects, more specifically the complex web of power relations that produces prisoners as governable subjects (Foucault, 1988).<sup>i</sup> Through creative, predominantly hidden, subversive practices women and men prisoners create alternative, positive, subject positions (Ugelvik, 2014) drawing on intersected identities that they have lived on the outside: gender, race and class (Bosworth, 1999), as well as, gender identity, sexuality, nationality, age and ability (Stanley, 2011). This article builds on this growing body of literature, but with a different focus, namely the confrontational resistance practices of women political prisoners. This is done through a gendered analysis of a 1976 prison break in Germany, in which four women of the Red Army Faction (RAF) and June 2nd Movement (J2M) escaped from the women's prison in West Berlin (henceforth Berlin). The objective is to explore how gendered resistance practices disrupt dominant constructions of gender through the lens of the hidden preparations and implementation of the women's escape.

The article expands our theoretical understanding of resistance to include the recognition of playfulness and laughter in the processes of subjectivation. The article draws on the works of poststructuralist feminists Helen Cixous (1976) and Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) who challenge dominant gendered constructions and understand play and laughter as a key part of subjectivation. Through subversive reversals they decentralize the male

vantage point and position women as signifier, who are laughing at the notion that women are 'not-men' and therefore lacking. I argue that opening up gendered resistance practices to play and laughter, lets us see the women's escape as a subversive reversal of the heroic, masculine prison break, in which their subjectivity as revolutionary violent women is revealed.

The study of women political prisoners' resistance practices largely remains an under explored topic (notable exceptions in the Northern Ireland context: Corcoran, 2006, 2007; Wahidin, 2016). The article draws on a combination of narrative and auto/biographical methods to explore the women's subjective experiences and meanings of the jailbreak in a nuanced and rich analysis. Together with the critical feminist theoretical approach, the article contributes to the strengthening of this tradition in criminology (Carlen, 1983; Howe, 1994; Bosworth, 1999; Hannah-Moffat, 2001). The article's focus on a country outside the Anglo-Saxon world adds to the growing, yet still less visible, body of knowledge in the contemporary study of criminal justice. Finally, the article contributes to the increasing research in English on gender, violence and the RAF/J2M (Colvin, 2009; Passmore, 2011; Bielby, 2012; Melzer, 2015).

The article is divided into two parts. First, I situate the 1976 prison break in the penal sociology literature on gendered resistance practices, before setting out the conceptual framework that extends resistance practices to include playfulness and laughter. This is followed by an introduction to the women and a description of the research method. Second, I explore the interview and auto-biographical narratives of the escape that reveal the backstage preparations, context and night of the escape. Here the women subverted and exploited normative gender expectations and through craft, skill, ingenuity and improvisation mounted the successful jailbreak. In the discussion, I apply the conceptual framing of resistance through play and laughter to critique the gender essentialism inherent in the public perception of the 1976 jailbreak. It is revealed how the women, who were perceived as both phallic women and enthralled by a dominant man, subverted the gender normative discourse through playful gender reversals. Before moving on, I briefly set out the

historical and political context of the RAF/J2M and the aftermath of the escape.

## **Setting the scene**

The RAF, also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group, and other militant groups, most notably the J2M,<sup>ii</sup> were young women and men radicalized in the 1960s during the student protests and in the 1970s during the campaigns against the conditions of detention of RAF prisoners. Women made up approximately 42% of group members (Diewald-Kerkmann, 2009). They held high-profile and commanding positions, which included, but not exclusively, Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof. The RAF and J2M engaged in a violent armed struggle from 1970 that lasted throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. From 1972 the RAF's armed struggle became a conflict that centred on the prisoners: the fight against isolation through public protest on the outside and ten collective hunger strikes on the inside, and to secure the prisoners' release through violent means.

In July 1976 four women of the RAF/J2M planned and escaped from the women's prison in Lehrter Strasse in Berlin. The women were M, Inge Viett, Gabriele Rollnik and Juliane Plambeck. The escape was meticulously planned over a six month period. They identified a skylight in the building that had no iron bars. With help from another woman on the outside, they made replica keys. They armed themselves with various objects. On the night, they unlocked their cell doors and they overwhelmed the guards. They climbed out of the window and then scaled down the wall using bedsheets that they had tied-together. Three of the women managed to get out of Berlin and Germany altogether. They stayed at large for substantial periods of time. The exception was M, who was rearrested within a few weeks.

## **Theoretical account of resistance and gender in prison**

This section situates the women political prisoners' 1976 escape within the wider literature on gender and resistance practices in prison, followed by a widening of prison resistance to include playfulness and laughter.

### *Hidden and confrontational resistance practices*

Women and men prisoners negotiate power relations within prison through a sense of self that is formed outside. It represents intersected identities that reflect wider social constructions of gender, race and class (Bosworth, 1999) and more recently gender identity, sexuality, nationality, age and ability (Stanley, 2011). Although prisoners are enmeshed in asymmetric gendered power relations, they nevertheless engage in everyday struggles with other prisoners and staff over food, exercise, visits, and association to retain a degree of choice and autonomy (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001). What distinguishes resistance from agency is that resistance practices are directed at penal governance strategies, such as normalization, rehabilitation and containment. In essence, they subvert the central punitive rationality, namely the production of governable subjects, in order to create alternative, more positive, subject positions (Ugelvik, 2014).<sup>iii</sup>

Thomas Ugelvik (2014) in his rich ethnographic study on men prisoner identities and masculinity writes that rather than *escape from* prison, prisoners *escape in* prison. Through everyday acts of resistance, nuanced and hidden practices, they escape the objectification of the self and they assume a more positive alternative subject position; that is to ‘transform themselves into responsible, autonomous, capable, ethically aware free men, albeit, of course, within the framework, and with the aid of, the resources a prison wing offers’ (Ugelvik, 2014: 239). The rejection of prison food is a way to escape from the enforced, mundane prison routines. The hidden preparation and consumption of food from home becomes a way for men to connect with outside identities and communities (Ugelvik, 2014). Similarly, Catrin Smith (2002), in her study on women prisoners, food and health, identifies ways in which women subvert the gendered normalization regime through the consumption of ‘unhealthy’ foods from the shop. This is experienced as ‘illicit pleasures’ (Smith, 2002). Ugelvik (2014) calls this disidentification rather than counter-identification position, which is based on public refusal. He argues that, overall, prisoners understand the futility of a confrontational approach; they consider it not only ineffective, but also (self-)destructive (Ugelvik, 2014: 239). For prisons have the capacity to ‘claw back’ (Carlen, 2002), to co-opt open subversive practices

and to produce the difficult (Corcoran, 2006) and unempowerable women prisoners (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). More specifically, women political prisoners are produced as both difficult and dangerous (Corcoran, 2006).

A sustained, confrontational prison campaign, though, is central to political imprisonment.<sup>iv</sup> Escapes while ordinarily considered exceptional within the prison context (Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Cohen and Taylor, 1972) have been an integral part of political prisoners' campaigns in the past, such as the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in Northern Ireland (McEvoy, 2001).

This has been the case for RAF and J2M political prisoners. They saw themselves in direct conflict with the state and the prison authorities. Their resistance practices were both a continuation of the armed struggle, as well as, a struggle against containment in the high security estate through solitary or small group isolation. The resistance practices consisted of an interplay of levels (Corcoran, 2006): from the nationally co-ordinated collective hunger strikes with more general demands that included an end to isolation for all RAF prisoners to local level resistance practices that included hunger strikes and other every day refusals to achieve improved conditions in individual prisons (Emmerich, 2013).

The RAF were predominately contained in high security units within prisons across the country. The units, in particular the adjoining exercise yards, were heavily guarded and fortified with a view to preventing an escape by helicopter. As a consequence, escapes in the context of the RAF and J2M were out of the ordinary resistance practices, but they were nevertheless a vital part of the violent campaign. Women, in particular Inge Viett and Gabriele Rollnik, were central to the escapes. To illustrate:

- 1970 a group of women, including Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof, organized and executed the break out of Andreas Baader while on supervised furlough. A library employee was shot. This event is understood as the inception of the RAF;
- 1973 Inge Viett escapes from the women's prison in West Berlin for the first time;
- 1976 Inge Viett, Gabriele Rollnik, M, and Juliane Plambeck break out of the women's prison in West Berlin;

- 1978 Inge Viett and Gabriele Rollnik break in to the men's prison Berlin Moabit (with a high security unit for political prisoners) disguised as lawyers and use force to free Till Meyer. They shoot a prison guard in the process.

### *Resistance, playfulness and laughter*

Prison escapes have been associated with public ridicule and mockery. Kieran McEvoy (2001) in his detailed study on paramilitary men prisoners in Northern Ireland explained how escapes reach right into the core of the ideological conflict between political prisoners and the state. Escapes both threaten and ridicule the state as sovereign and the prison as an institution. Similarly, Atreyee Sen (2018) writing about Naxa mass prison breaks in India writes that escapes as mockery provide a disguise from which to expose state oppression, as well as, ridicule arbitrary and abusive prison staff. The focus of this article, though, is the significance of playfulness and laughter for gendered resistance practices at an individual level, in particular as an integral part of subjectivation.<sup>v</sup>

To take Judith Butler's ([1990] 2007) work on subjectivation through gender performativity as a starting point, in *Gender Trouble* she highlights that gender reality is fictitious. Gender is a performative rather than expressive act. It is continuously produced through the interplay of repetition and/or variation of the gendered self within the constraints of discursive practices that produce binary dominant gender ideals and at the same time obscure their derivative origin. Central to the legibility of gendered performance are repetitions that cite gender norms. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler ([1993] 2011) writes that

‘Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment.’ (177).

For her there is no external position to heteronormative discursive practices. As gendered subjects we are faced with the problem ‘not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of

gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself' (Butler [1990] 2007: 203). Variation in gender performance can be achieved through subversive citations. Butler ([1990] 2007) here refers to gender parody and mimicry (e.g. drag), which exposes the derivative nature of heteronormative discursive practices through 'an imitation without origin' (188).<sup>vi</sup>

I argue that gender improvisation or parody through subversive citations could be explored more fully through the concepts of play and laughter. Hélène Cixous (1976) in the *The Laugh of the Medusa* produces a call to arms for women to assert their individual and collective identity through writing and public speech, in which the signifier is woman. Cixous promotes a 'feminine scriptive space where women can learn to approach their own forbidden bodies' (Aneja, 2005: 57). In her writing Cixous sets out to reappropriate the feminine from cultural constraints and to revalorize it.<sup>vii</sup> For her, women's subjectivity is built on women who see themselves whole and beautiful (Suleiman, 1990: 168).

Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) takes this up in her book *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* in which she analyses the connections between French poststructural feminism and the male French avant-garde. She explains how French feminists like Cixous both appropriated surrealist reversals that expose gender normative discourses, as well as, critiqued the marginalization of women in French surrealism. According to Suleiman (1990) in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous produces a surrealist reversal of the myth of the monstrous Medusa. In Ovid's retelling of the myth, Medusa was once considered a beauty until she was raped by Neptune in Minerva's temple. The Goddess turned Medusa into a monster as punishment. After Perseus cut off Medusa's head, Pegasus and his brother emerged from the wound. The severed head became a weapon that could turn all, who gazed at it, into stone.

Suleiman (1990) argues that Cixous draws on surrealist conceptions of margin, transgression and play to produce a playful reversal of this myth, in which the Medusa is returned to her previous beauty before the rape. She exposes through laughter and ridicule the normative construction of women as



castrated, as lacking. In her critical analysis of feminine writing, Anu Aneja (2005) maintains that Cixous does not reject all cultural dominant constructions of femininity. Rather, she reappropriates and rewrites ‘traditionally devalued’ notions of femininity including motherhood, which she applies as a metaphor (Aneja, 2005: 62). Cixous rejects the notion that to oppose patriarchal structures women and men need to play the game of the Father (Aneja, 2005: 62). For women and men have much to gain from an alternative to dominant, masculine capitalist society; namely one, that is built on ‘diffusion, multiplicity, giving, loving, nurturing, naming differences, naming differently’ and that enables playfulness and creativity (Manners, 2005).

Why should we imagine women playing and laughing? Suleiman (1990) argues *The Laugh of the Medusa* as a whole ‘is a trope for women’s autonomous subjectivity’ (168). For Suleiman play and laughter are constituting factors. Drawing on writers such as Freud, Winnicott and Barthes, Suleiman (1990) highlights that playing is central to subjectivation. Suleiman (1990) argues that if we see women playing and laughing outside the confines of hegemonic masculinity, we recognize their subjectivity

‘as autonomous and free, yet (or for that reason?) [who are] able to take the risk of “infinite expansion” that goes with creativity’ (179).

The purpose of this approach is to look at how play and laughter can disrupt heteronormative conceptions of femininity to produce alternative subject positions through subversive reversals. In this case, the way in which the playful reworking of the masculine prison break reveals women revolutionaries who see themselves as whole and beautiful.

## **Research Method**

The 1976 all women escape emerged as an unexpected story in the interview I conducted with M on 8 August 2008. A women’s prison break seemed such an exceptional event that it lent itself to break open gender normative expectations in relation to women’s confrontational and violent resistance

practices in prison. It was not possible for me to set up interviews with the other women in the group for various reasons. Consequently, I drew on auto/biographical material from Gabriele Rollnik and Inge Viett to enrich the story of the prison break (see Rollnik and Dubbe, 2003; Viett, [1997], 2007).

### *The Women*

Before moving on to the research method and particular questions of validity, I introduce M, Gabriele Rollnik, Inge Viett and Juliane Plambeck.

M was a lawyer who worked in the practice of Horst Mahler, an early supporter of the RAF. She was involved in a number of bank robberies to secure funds for the RAF. She was arrested early on, in 1970, and was convicted of founding and membership in a criminal organisation, and initially sentenced to twelve years in prison. This was reduced to seven years and six months following an appeal. She was re-arrested on 21 July 1976, two weeks after the prison break. At a further trial she received an additional four years in prison. She spent the remainder of her incarceration in the high security unit in Berlin Moabit men's prison. She was released in 1988. She works as an author and grows produce on her allotment.

Gabriele Rollnik and Inge Viett were members of the J2M. Both took part in the 1975 hostage taking of the conservative politician, Peter Lorenz, through which the J2M successfully negotiated the release of five political prisoners. Both were arrested in 1975. Following the prison break in July 1976, Gabriele Rollnik and Inge Viett managed successfully to get out of Berlin. Both took part in the liberation of Till Meyer from Berlin Moabit prison in 1978. Gabriele Rollnik was re-arrested in 1978 and extradited from Bulgaria. She spent the remainder of her 15 year sentence in small group isolation in high security units both in Berlin Moabit and Lübeck women's prison. Following her release she completed her sociology degree. She works as a child and youth counsellor. Inge Viett remained at liberty. She emigrated to the GDR in 1982. Following German Unification in 1990, she was arrested and put on trial for the shooting of a police officer in Paris in 1981. In 1992 she was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to thirteen years. She

was conditionally released on probation in 1997. She is a political writer and activist.

Juliane Plambeck stayed at large until her death in a car accident in 1980.

### *Life stories and questions of validity*

The interview with M is part of a study that takes a prison sociology approach to explore the prison life stories of political prisoners with a focus on former members of the RAF/J2M (Emmerich, 2013). I use narrative methodology, as well as, auto/biographic method to engage with political prisoners' reflective counter-narratives of their experiences of isolation and resistance in prison. These stories are valued for their subjective and political accounts that challenge and disrupt prevailing narratives, while at the same time it is accepted that these accounts exist within a highly polarized public debate (Varon, 2004). It is precisely the different interpretations, perceptions and meanings that the former RAF/J2M prisoners attach to or derive from their experiences, events and beliefs that broaden our understanding of the lived experiences of incarceration. During the interviews the former RAF prisoners were very conscious of questions of intelligibility and credibility. There seemed to be the perceived need for these stories to adhere to the dominant conceptions of fact and fiction; what Becker calls the 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker, 1967: 242).

Both narrative interviews and auto/biographical research are subject-centred methods that focus on subjective experiences and meanings.<sup>viii</sup> Together they helped enrich and broaden the accounts of the prison break. Both raise similar questions of validity. The experiences and viewpoints expressed in narrative interviews, as well as, in the auto/biographical text are 'mediated through the present, including the workings of language and [power] relationship' (Merrill and West, 2009: 163). To critically reflect on credibility and intelligibility, I drew on the work of narrative researchers that emphasized the need for 'imagination' (Kirmayer, 2003) and a openness to 'ambiguity' (Cary, 1999) to understand narratives that deviate from what is considered conventional or acceptable in this hierarchy of credibility. This is

because the context that influences the credibility of narratives is subject to gendered power relations. The aim of the research is to make the women's 1976 prison break legible as revolutionary violent womanhood that challenges and subverts the male vantage point.

## **Narratives of the escape**

The women's stories give a rich insight into the backstage preparation, context and night of the escape. They detail the craft, skill, ingenuity and improvisation they applied to exploit and subvert both the prison's containment and normalization regimes, as well as, normative gender expectations.

### *Distorting 'good female behaviour'*

The women engaged in confrontational resistance practices. These were coordinated, everyday resistance practices to wear down the regime and to create the necessary space for the planning and execution of the jailbreak. They improvised through concerted and sustained resistance practices to gain greater autonomy and increased opportunities to communicate with one another (see also Corcoran, 2006; McEvoy, 2001).

Following her successful escape in 1973, Inge Viett returned to the prison in 1975. On her return she noticed relaxations in the regime that the women had produced through a concerted and sustained campaign over the control of their cell space - rearranging furniture and covering the spy hole -. This was originally met with disciplinary measures, as well as, the return of the furniture to the allocated places. By 1975 rearranging their cell had become an accepted practice, or at least the authorities had acquiesced. Similarly, their separation from each other remained official policy, but in reality it was no longer enforced in a strict and meticulous manner. Any open and collective action was clamped down, yet the women had managed to carve out pockets of spaces for communication (Viett, [1997] 2007: 152).

The relaxation in the regime was also evidenced in interactions with ordinary prisoners and staff. Gabriele Rollnik explains that after her arrival in

the women's prison in 1975, she was greeted by two ordinary women prisoners who presented her with a box of chocolate teacakes (*Schokoküsse*). This was an allusion to a bank robbery in which J2M members had handed out chocolate teacakes to the bank's customers and staff. This led some to refer to them as comic guerrilla (*Spaßguerrilla/Stadtguerrilla*).

*'It was really funny. Imagine: The guard unlocks the cell door so that prisoners are able to hand over chocolate teacakes. A really lovely reception. At the time ordinary prisoners were heavily politicized, many sympathized with us, because our struggle also represented hope for them. In the main they were well-informed about the RAF's and J2M most recent activities; of course they had also heard about our bank robbery with the chocolate teacakes' (Rollnik and Dubbe, 2003: 58).*

The playful reversal of the hold up as an exchange was understood by the ordinary women prisoners. It was one that they humorously reproduced and played with.<sup>ix</sup>

This created an environment in which it was possible to plan and coordinate the 1976 prison break. The women identified the material weaknesses of the prison's architecture, which was not originally constructed as a prison. The late 19th century, redbrick building was converted into a women's prison after 1945. Architecturally, this meant that the prison lacked many distinctive features, such as high walls and perimeter fencing. In fact, parts of the building and windows immediately faced onto the street. The idea for the escape turned into a realistic prospect after M realized that there were no iron bars on the skylight above the door to the prison library. Inge writes:

*'It had turned opaque during the endless years in which it seemed to have had no other function than to be discovered by a woman prisoner set on attaining her freedom' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 152).*

They worked out that through this window they would get access to the prison roof. However, M explained, that getting to the window was far from straightforward, because there were still a number of locked doors that they had to get through.

*'M: First, we had to figure out how to get there. Initially we thought we'd do it during the day or in the evenings after watching TV and knock them [guards] out. We thought, mmmm, not good. And then at one point, we had the idea or it just developed that ... [to copy keys]' (Interview with M: 27).*

In order to collect material to make an imprint of the keys, they distorted the gender-specific regime in the prison. Following Butler ([1990] 2007), gender identity in women's prisons is the innovative repetition within a gendered normalization regime. Claudia Schwinn (2004), in her study of women-centred normalization (*Resozialisierung*) in the case of Frankfurt women's prison, writes that the regime aims to promote self-reliance, resilience and a reflective nature in women through a gendered treatment and/or training programme, in order to empower women for work and life on the outside (Schwinn, 2004; see also Hannah-Moffat, 2001). Women are encouraged to become enterprising in a very feminine way: independent, resilient, yet demure (Schwinn, 2004). The regime extends beyond the support to lead a life free from crime (for men) to a more invasive *Ersatz*-normalization; one that produces women who perform their gender identity well.

*M: We needed an imprint of the key. And of course the craft classes were very useful for this. They were organized by a social worker ... Anyway we made a replica key and it fit (Interview with M: 27).*

The women were able to associate in pairs during their daily half hour in the exercise yard. During this time M and Inge were able to communicate and plan the escape. More fortuitously, the social worker who occasionally supervised the table tennis sessions, had all three keys on her. She sometimes joined in and would leave the keys on the table. It took several weeks until the women had impressions of all three keys (Viett, [1997] 2007: 153).

Through these resistance practices they had created space for the planning and execution of the escape, what Mahuya Bandyopadhyay (2010) has termed 'interactional spaces'. In her rich ethnographic study of incarceration, she writes how everyday life in prison is governed by the boundaries within and without. She finds that although interaction is limited in prison through monitoring and surveillance, people in prison are able to collectively exploit material weaknesses to find 'free, apparently unmonitored areas of interaction' (Bandyopadhyay, 2010: 281).

It is precisely the hidden context of the successful prison escape that reveals the distorted imitations of the 'good female' prisoner. The parody becomes evident through the subversion of craft classes and sporting

activities, in order to systematically break down the prison's control strategies. This created the space for communication and to employ skill and judgement to identify weaknesses in their material environment.

### *The Keys? knowhow, craft and discipline*

Dedication to discipline and refinement is evidenced in the planning stage of the escape for which Inge Viett ([1997], 2007) provides a detailed account (152-158). It had taken six months all in all. In addition to the cell door key, they had needed the keys to access the corridor to the library and to the library itself. Making the keys was a painstaking process. Her plan was to make plastic keys out of epoxy resin, material that Susan, on the outside, had managed to smuggle in together with a small pocket knife. To begin with the original imprints were imperfect. She traced the imprints on pieces of paper and used the stencil to create wooden models. She used up five wooden boards, distributed at meal times, until she had one good model of each of the three keys. She was able to try out the keys; they worked but the material was not durable enough. So, she turned to her plan to make hard plastic keys. She worked at night with the use of a candle that she had made out of margarine. She made more precise imprints from the wooden models to use as moulds for the epoxy resin. This proved problematic in several ways. The mixture produced a pungent smell, yet luckily the guards on the night shift did not notice it. And somehow the consistency of the mixture was not quite right. Of the three keys only the cell door key hardened properly and looked promising. After working on it some more, it slipped out of her hand and shattered on the floor (Viett, [1997] 2007: 153-4 for the paragraph).

*'This could have been my heart; that is how disappointed I was. You have to imagine the amount of effort and risk it takes to smuggle every piece of material into jail. The ways, means and opportunities are not readily repeated; in most cases it is a one-off chance or the result of months of preparation [Ergebnis monatelang gezogener Fäden]' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 154).*

While she was picking up the pieces of the key, she realized that the teeth were still intact. She needed a shaft; for this she adapted the handle of her handheld mirror to attach to the key's blade.

*'I carried my skeleton key around with me for a few days; eventually I had the opportunity to try it out on Biene's cell door [Juliane]. It worked! I unlocked the cell door. For a few seconds I stared into Biene's eyes that were full of incredulity' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 155).*

But they had one more obstacle to overcome. For obvious reasons cell doors can only be unlocked from the outside. The women had a solution to this, too. M had been transferred to a more secure cell, which had a door flap, to pass through food. The key to the door flap was a square key.

*'M: Somehow I still had the square key from Mayence prison. I then unlocked the door flap [from the outside]. And it was pretty heavy and therefore remained shut, even though [it was unlocked]. [From the inside] you could push against it and it opened. And the whole thing was set' (Interview with M: 28).*

The models were smuggled out and made into replica keys. The women drew on their underground support networks for assistance. Inge writes:

*'Our escape plan took on proper contours. I managed to get out to Susan the cell key, which fit, and two wooden models. From these models she created real replica keys. ... We could not let anything be found in the frequent cell searches. Nothing was to raise suspicion' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 155).*

Mary Corcoran (2007), in her important study on the marginalized position of women political prisoners in Northern Ireland and their gendered resistance practices, finds that women political prisoners did not need to be resocialized; rather they were far too independent, resilient, resourceful and working towards to wrong goals.<sup>x</sup> This is mirrored here. The women applied great skill, perseverance, ingenuity and risk-taking to procure the materials and to make models of two keys and a working replica of the cell door key. They exploited the permeability of the prison. Its exposure shattered the myth of the total institution. 'Like ants all things secretly walked out of the jail and back again' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 155).



### *The night of the escape*

M referred to the escape as ‘classic’. Classic can denote something that is typical of its kind, as well as, something that is conventional. The night of the break out can be read as both. It was classic in the way the women pulled off the escape; a timeless and consummate performance. It was a mimicry of the spectacular prison breaks in the popular imagination, with copied keys, knotted sheets and a getaway car. The women improvised on the night. On the night of the escape, they waited until the two women officers had done their round, before M unlocked her cell door and also let the others out of their cells:

*‘M: We waited ten minutes. I unlocked and let the others out. And then I locked the door again. After that we tried the other key and it didn’t fit. We knew that they [prison warders] went on another round between one and two in the morning. We waited until then. ... They came around the corner and we were waiting for them’ (Interview with M: 29-30).*

Once they had overwhelmed the women guards, the women managed to use their keys to get to the library; they tied up the prison warders in the library and made their escape.

*‘M: We climbed through the window - it wasn’t big, but we didn’t have problems getting through - onto a projecting roof; then onto the roof of the corridor that linked the library with the main building; and then using the iron bars on the windows, we climbed past the TV room. It was a bit of luck that there were bars on the windows. In a very classic way we used knotted sheets to climb down onto the street’ (Interview with M: 29-30).*

Despite the delay, Susan was still waiting for them in a stolen Mercedes. They scattered caltrops across the road (*Reifentöter*) before they set off. By the time the guards raised the alarm, they had vanished.

The jailbreak was ‘classic’ in another sense. It was traditional and conventional, for it was framed by gender normative expectations on both sides. Both the women and the women guards expected an essentialized gender performance from each other. The guards were expected to behave like ‘weak’ women and the women political prisoners as violent anti-women. M explained that she was conscious how her height taken together with her classification as dangerousness would affect the women guards, when they

overpowered them. M purposely decided not to arm herself. For M was less concerned with the guards fighting back, but more concerned with their raising the alarm.

*'M: We had also armed ourselves. One had a pipe; one had bedsprings; one had something that looked like a small handgun. I had nothing, because I was the tallest and I had thought about what to do if they [the prison warders] panic. That is something you definitely need to consider. You overwhelm them and they start to scream. ... I was able to react relatively quickly and cover her mouth' (Interview with M: 29-30).*

Although the women knew that they would be perceived as 'bad women terrorists' (*böse Terroristinnen*), they were nevertheless surprised by the guards' response once they had overpowered them. The women guards were frightened of being hurt and pleaded not to be hit. Inge writes:

*'It was embarrassing. What did they think of us? It did not occur to us to hit them; we are not like their thugs from the armed response units [Rollkommandos] ... They can only imagine that we are going to act the same way as they would: bordering on sadism, with vindictiveness' (Viett, [1997] 2007: 157).*

This brief moment in their encounter lays bare the cultural hegemony of the 'illusion of gender essentialism' (Butler, 1997), in the sense the way in which gendered power relations produce and reinforce a fiction that both estranges and isolates.

The planning and execution of the escape brings to light both a parody of the good female prisoner, as well as, gender mimicry of the classic prison break through co-option of traditionally conceived masculine traits (intelligence, dexterity, physicality and risk-taking). The women's vanishing act plays on wit, ingenuity, resourcefulness, creativity, and violence.

## **Discussion: essentialism, resistance and playfulness**

Jailbreaks are deeply gendered. They are framed by the trope that women do not escape (Medlicott, 2007). This reproduces gender normative constructions in relation to the most spectacular feats against adversity prisoners can master.<sup>xi</sup> Women are considered to lack the physical strength, the skills, ingenuity and, most of all, the drive to escape.

When the women did escape in 1976, they were deemed to have transgressed their biologically and socially determined gender identities (*Der Spiegel*, 1976).<sup>xii</sup> At the time women of the RAF/J2M were publicly portrayed as either controlled by a dominant man (eg ‘Baader’s Bonnies or Bunnies’) (*Der Spiegel*, 1976) or as degenerate (*entartet*), ‘phallic women’ (Von Paczensky, 1978: 10). This produces a paradox for revolutionary women: women are deemed both sexually dependent and controlled by violent men and out of control non-women who are especially dangerous and marked by ‘biological and social dysfunctionality’ (Corcoran, 2006: 71). This essentialist conception draws on outdated criminological theories of biological determinism that link women’s violent behaviour to their gendered transgressions and deviancy.<sup>xiii</sup> Sarah Colvin, in her rich linguistic analysis of subjectivity and collective identity in the writings of Ulrike Meinhof, the RAF’s political voice, writes that these theories were central to various studies into the high proportion of women in terrorist organizations that were commissioned by different German state institutions in the 1970s and 80s (Colvin, 2009: 189-193). The question of women’s sexuality and terms describing their sex life, such as prudishness and promiscuity, became necessary variables for determining causal links in research on women and terrorism (Colvin, 2009; Passmore, 2011).

Despite the protection of women’s equality in the West German constitution (Basic Law), postwar conservatism and social policies protected the nuclear family. This in turn sustained the dominance of traditional gender roles. Robert Moeller (1997) has written widely about how a politics centered on gender difference influenced women’s economic and social status in postwar West Germany. He writes that the sustained dominance of traditional gender roles was reinforced through

‘patriarchal authority; women’s economic dependence on men; the ideological elevation of motherhood; pronatalist sentiments; and the normative conception of the “family” as an ahistorical social unit transcending class division’ (Moeller, 1997: 110).

Central to this dominant construction of womanhood is the irreconcilability of women and violence; for normative femininity equates women with mothers and motherhood is linked inherently to nurturing and

caring. Patricia Melzer (2015), in her comprehensive and critical study of the relationship between feminism and RAF/J2M women, argues that, in West Germany at the time, not only conservative values and policies promoted a motherhood ideology. In cultural feminism, a strand of feminism dominant in the 1980s peace movement, women also based their politics on motherhood: the financial and social emancipation of mothers, their care work and 'maternal ethics' (Melzer, 2011).

Melzer writes that RAF/J2M women de-centred motherhood and expanded womanhood to include political violence (Melzer, 2015). They understood women's liberation in the context of their revolutionary politics (Melzer, 2011). Therefore, liberation included a rejection of reproduction and motherhood. Reproduction, on one hand, was considered incompatible with revolutionary politics, for it entailed a life underground and the prospect of long prison sentences.<sup>xiv</sup> Yet, the rejection of reproduction was also 'in part because of reproduction's racist significance for German nationalism' (Melzer, 2011: 90). Motherhood, on the other hand, produced an irreconcilable conflict. For Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, the RAF leaders imprisoned in 1972, who both left their children, this conflict was between the institution of motherhood and their maternal emotions (Melzer, 2011: 99).

The RAF/J2M women were degendered, because they rejected the normative citations of reproduction, motherhood and non-violence and, because they openly subverted motherhood and womanhood ruled by patriarchy and framed in reference to masculinity (Suleiman, 1990). Following Cixous' notion of the maternal as metaphor, then, the women did not play the game of the Father - they did not reject- but they re-appropriated and de-centred reproduction, mothering and care through an incorporation of revolutionary politics and violence. A close look at the planning and execution of the escape brings to light the women's transgressive 'citationality' (Butler, [1993] 2011). Outlaw girls's laughter, following Harris (1999) whose study explores the staging of femininities in performance art, is directed at the assumption that the decider of meanings, including what is playful, is masculine (50).<sup>xv</sup> It exposes it as fictitious and ridiculous.

‘There is no room for her if she is not a he. If she is a her-she, it’s in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the “truth” with laughter’ (Cixous, 1976: 888).

The women shattered the ontological security that the fiction of an essentialism of gender identity produces (Butler, 1997). The women reversed the othering of woman through playful improvisations of gender performance that take womanhood into alternative, challenging and violent directions.

Playing and laughter beyond the confines of hegemonic masculinity, then, can be considered central to subjectivation. For as Suleiman (1990) argues, it opens up creativity through risk-taking and the limitless possibilities that emerge through play. The women reworked and appropriated the heroic, revolutionary and masculine prison escape. They played with the derivative, masculine political prisoner identity: they identified weaknesses in the material structure; they persistently eroded the gendered containment regime to create space for communication and planning; they used knowhow, creativity and skill to craft the keys; and they improvised around a mistake on the day. The women combined knowhow, craft and courage to produce a very creative endeavour through play.

The 1976 jailbreak represents an extraordinary defiance against the prison’s punitive capacity, the sovereign power to punish and patriarchy. The escape was pulled off by women who showed themselves to be resourceful, skilled, creative, independent actors, who acted with humour and wit. Yet, they were also women who were members of armed groups engaged in violent aggressions against the state authorities. Revolutionary womanhood expands the possibilities of womanhood to include militancy. Through playful, subversive reversals, the women’s subjectivity is revealed.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For an overview (Rebughini, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> The J2M was a left-wing urban guerrilla group that successfully managed to press free prisoners in the 1970s, most notably through the hostage taking of the conservative politician Peter Lorenz in 1975. The group dissolved in 1980 and some members joined the RAF.

<sup>iii</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for a different paper for pointing this out to me.

<sup>iv</sup> A notable exception to this was the prison campaign against Apartheid on Robben Island. For a detailed study of the multi-layered resistance practices that moved beyond shaping the spaces of their imprisonment, see Fran Buntman (2003).

<sup>v</sup> See Bosworth (1999) chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of the benefits of feminist theory for prison sociology through destabilizing the universal conception of women.

<sup>vi</sup> It is important to note that parody is not of itself subversive. It can reinforce heteronormativity if it 'reidealize[s] heterosexual norms without calling them into question' (Butler, [1993] 2011: 176).

<sup>vii</sup> According to Aneja (2005) this is one of the two interconnected functions of Cixous' writing. The other is 'speaking to an about women so that they can carve a way out of cultural repression ...' (61). The latter has been subject to significant critique that Cixous' focus on the body in feminine writing ends up essentializing women. Aneja (2005) in a nuanced analysis of Cixous and the critique argues that the

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conflation of the feminine with the female at times in Cixous' texts is a form of 'slippage'. This, she argues, is a way for Cixous to expose gender normative constructions of femininity and masculinity. For a critique of Cixous' writing as Western focussed in which she Others and homogenizes the subaltern perspective, see Manners (2005).

<sup>viii</sup> There has been a growing interest in auto/biographical research in social sciences, partly as a response to a perceived disconnect between the dominant methodological approaches, such as positivism and determinism, and individual lived experiences (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000). For a summary of the literature see (Goodwin, 2018: 3).

<sup>ix</sup> The politicization of 'ordinary' prisoners was considered a real threat by the authorities. It was one of the rationalities for the containment strategy of RAF/J2M prisoners through isolation.

<sup>x</sup> This was reflected in interviews with a former defence lawyer (B1, 2008) and with Professor Peter-Alexis Albrecht, University of Frankfurt (2008).

<sup>xi</sup> There are other public examples: in Northern Ireland women republican prisoners attempted an escape (Corcoran, 2006); Assata Olugbala Shakur a woman political activist of colour who escaped from prison in New Jersey in 1979 and fled to Cuba (Shakur, Davis and Hinds 1987).

<sup>xii</sup> For a detailed critical gendered analysis of the portrayal of RAF/J2M women in the media, see (Bielby, 2012).

<sup>xiii</sup> For a rich, critical analysis into the history of German Criminology in particular the rise of biological determinism in the 1920s/30s see (Wetzell, 2000).

<sup>xiv</sup> For a very brief summary on the movement for women's reproductive rights and abortion in the 1970s, see (Anon, 1971).

<sup>xv</sup> Outlaw girls is taken from Inge Viett's ([1997] 2007) description '*Mädchenräuberbande*' (157).