

Judy Rabinowitz Price

Judy Rabinowitz Price in conversation with Pamela Windham Stewart

Judy Rabinowitz Price is a member of Reclaim Holloway, which has been campaigning for a Women's Building on the site of London's Holloway women's prison since its closure in 2016. *The End of the Sentence* was an exhibition staged at the Stanley Picker Gallery at Kingston University in 2020, that presented her research into the history of the prison and drew on relationships developed through Reclaim Holloway to explore the impact of the criminal justice system on women.

As part of the exhibition Price presented a new moving image installation, *The Good Enough Mother*, featuring Dora Gordine's *Happy Baby* (1947-48), a bronze sculpture acquired for the prison's Mother and Baby Unit in 1948. The soundtrack to *The Good Enough Mother* draws on the writing and fieldwork of midwife Dr Laura Abbott and forensic psychotherapist Pamela Windham Stewart to explore the incarcerated pregnancy.

In conjunction with *The End of the Sentence*, Gordine's *Happy Baby*, on loan from the National Justice Museum, was displayed at Dorich House Museum.

This collaborative text reflects a discussion between Judy Rabinowitz Price and Pamela Windham Stewart at the Stanley Picker Gallery on 19 February 2020 and is presented alongside stills from *The Good Enough Mother*. Some of the names of individuals quoted in the talk and cited in this transcript have been anonymised for confidentiality.

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Judy Price is a London based artist and filmmaker and Postgraduate Research Coordinator, Department of Film and Photography, Kingston School of Art, Kingston University. She is interested in how art produces different ways of thinking about contested sites and engages with collective struggles. Her practice is research-based and includes photography, moving image and sound, composed as single-screen works and multiscreen installations.

Pamela Windham Stewart has worked for over twenty years as a psychotherapist in several prisons, including HMP Holloway, where she has developed and facilitated therapy groups for mothers and babies who are incarcerated. With Jessica Collier, she co-edited *The End of the Sentence: Psychotherapy with Female Offenders* (Routledge, 2018) from which the title of the Stanley Picker Gallery exhibition is borrowed.

Judy: I'm here tonight with Pamela Windham Stewart. Pamela and I met about two years ago after Holloway Prison closed in 2016... Pamela is a forensic psychotherapist. She worked in Holloway for over 20 years and founded the *Born Inside* project, which observes mothers with their children. After Holloway closed, she worked up until the pandemic as a psychotherapist in Bronzefield and Downview prisons. These two prisons are where most of the women that were in Holloway who still had to fulfil their sentence were sent when Holloway closed in 2016. Pamela, thank you very much for joining us tonight on a cold dark evening. It's been a very long day for you, hasn't it? Tell us where you've come from?

Pamela: I've come from Downview Prison today, where I work one day a week as a psychotherapist. It's a long way from Holloway. This is a fantastic opportunity, and I would like to thank Judy and the gallery for enabling this event to occur. It's not really about me talking, it's about talking for the women with whom I work, and who desperately and totally deserve a voice about their own experience. I think your exhibition expresses this really beautifully. That this is a stain on us, the way people are imprisoned, and the more people that can embark on a conversation with us, which I hope you'll feel free to do tonight, is very important. In many ways, I'm not a prison abolitionist, and we might get onto that later. But the way that we punish people who've been punished since before they were born is something that I really hope we can have a conversation about. Particularly now with the social debate about the very strong adverse experiences of childhood. The way that that is a shadow on the sufferer throughout their whole lives, and makes them very vulnerable, and victims of a society that's not caring for the mothers in the social context in which they're born. We all have a role to play in a growing awareness of this. What does punishment do, and what does punishment say about us?

Maybe the problem isn't the prisons, maybe we're the prisons? We need to start asking ourselves, why does Britain have the highest prison incarceration rate of any country in Europe?... Let's talk and think together, this is a collaborative effort, like psychotherapy is a collaborative effort to stir up a curiosity and a conversation. I am just so deeply touched by your film Judy. Having worked with hundreds of mothers and babies in prison and pregnant women in prison, to see that little baby's image just fade away like somebody's dying breath at the end was incredibly moving. We need to think about the transgenerational flow of this kind of suffering. We could stop it if we wanted to, and maybe talking about possibilities could be part of our discussion tonight.

J: Thank you, Pamela, for those words and insights. I'm really pleased and honoured that Laura Abbott is here tonight. It's thanks to Laura and Pamela's research that I was able to make this film and also my partner Andy Conio co-scripting with me. A lot of the material we've used in the film is drawn from the

transcriptions of 28 interviews Laura undertook with women who were pregnant in prison. These formed the basis of her really important PhD thesis as a midwife on the incarcerated pregnancy. Pamela was one of Laura's supervisors.

P: It was a great pleasure. It just shows you the importance of collaboration in this work, because collaboration is really a counter argument against incarceration, isn't it? People joining together, thinking together and sharing. It was a fantastic opportunity for me, Laura.

J: Pamela, perhaps you can take us back to your first days in Holloway. It's interesting to know what you did prior to this as your background is quite interesting. You have a background in art history and then advertising?

P: [laughs] And beauty.

J: So you came to psychotherapy later on. This was a journey for you, but it didn't stop at psychotherapy? You entered the gate of some of the most difficult places in society.

P: In 1996 I was doing an MA at the Tavistock Clinic, and I was getting really pissed off with the 'temple of wisdom'. There was so much emphasis on the inner life of the child. I kept thinking what about the outer life; psychotherapy and politics. I really wanted to go to a place to study mothers and babies. The great psychotherapist Donald Wincott says that "there is no such thing as a baby". Mothering is a dyad, a connection, an entity. I wanted to see if it's really true that anxiety makes it impossible for the mother to think about her baby.

I live in Islington. One day I was driving up Camden Road. I thought where can I find a laboratory and see where there's a lot of anxiety and how mothers are coping? Out of the window, I see Holloway prison. I wrote to the prison and asked if I could observe mothers because I am very interested in child development. They said "Okay, just don't treat this like a zoo or a lab!"

I went in with a fixed view of this is going to be terrible. I had a *Guardian* article already writing in my head. But you know something, I was absolutely wrong about mothers and babies. What I found, without idealising prison, was that the mother and baby unit was for a time a place of safety (not for all, we don't want to generalise, minimise people's experience). They had bed linen, mealtimes, and a very important thing for new mothers – companionship. I've had to really reconsider what was happening in prison. What's life outside of prison like for the mothers in prison that it's better that they say "I feel safe, I can hold my baby, I'm not alone if the baby's crying at night, nobody's beating me up, there are no drugs". What I found for a

lot of the women, not all, was that the difficulty and the anxiety started to arise right before it was time for release. This was when the baby started to get eczema, fall down more and cry. So I had to change my notions about prison and custody. That for a time in prison there was a sense of safety and reliability, medical care, mental health interventions and a lot less loneliness. I think one of the beautiful things about your film and the statue is the loneliness of this baby suspended in space with no social contacts and no relationships. Nobody's holding that baby, it's on a plinth.

What I really hope we can do together tonight is think together about what we think prisons are for? If around 65% re-offend within a year of being in prison, then this is something that's not working, is it? If 65% of the women coming in have been sexually abused as children, what is their story, what is their narrative that they're now being punished for having difficulties with substances or being homeless and on the street. What part might their story have a part to play. This makes me passionate about raising these questions with compassion, not just saying, we're wonderful, they're bad and prisons are just awful.

We're the prison. If we want things to be different it's not about changing just a couple of things in the prison. How did they get there? Why is all this money being spent on them now? When they were little children they were sleeping in caravans or in the care system on their twelfth care placement. Where was the money then? Where was the money for Kelly, the young woman sentenced for murder? As a child Kelly had been in fifty-six care places by the time she was eighteen. She had Archie at twenty-one whilst in prison and was deemed unfit to care for Archie by social services. He was given by social services to Kelly's mother to care for him, the very mother who failed to care for Kelly when she was a child. An example of the transgenerational pattern in many prisoners' families.

I often wondered when working with female offenders in therapy what might have happened if there had been financial resources available to them when they were children. Like many offenders, Kelly's life was a combination of extreme poverty and insufficient childhood services to support families that are struggling, and indicative of Britain's class system.

Don't ever for a minute believe there's such a thing as senseless crime. There's no senseless crime, that's a cop-out. And that's what I think I've really learned along the way.

J: A very small percentage of women are in prison for violent offences. Most are there for very small crimes; a few months for stealing a jumper, substance abuse, homelessness, sex work, etc. But the problem is, even if these small sentences might offer a small space of refuge for some, for others it's completely

disruptive to their families, to their children, losing their houses, losing their jobs, and then there's a stigma that comes with a prison sentence. So there's a whole other layer where women lose any support that they did have.

P: I am much more of a stories person than a statistics person. Just imagine this statistic. When a mother goes to prison, think how many children stay in their own home? What percentage?

Audience: 40%?

A: 5%?

P: You're the closest at 5%. What's important to understand is when a woman goes to prison, because she is usually the primary caregiver and the father is often absent there is no one to care for the children. Also bear in mind that if the father is present within the family dynamic, he is often the co-defendant/accomplice also serving a sentence for the same crime as the mother. As a consequence the children will be dispersed. Maybe there'll be a family member who can take care of them. However, in the research into adverse childhood experiences, top of the list is having had a parent in prison... We are punishing the people who are already being punished by poverty, parents in prison, mental health issues. It's hard to not go a bit crazy thinking about this because it's mad, isn't it? What a thing to do to people. Why do we have to do it? Why do we keep doing it? Why does this country have so many people in prison? There are 80,000 people in prison, of which 5,000 are women. Over 200–300,000 children are affected by this. We know having a family member in prison is the biggest determinant of going to prison.

A: What is the role of psychotherapy or psychiatry, in processing? Because it seems there's a disconnect between all this knowledge and actual processing. And it's in all echelons of society, it seems.

P: I can't speak for the psychiatrists. As psychotherapists we try to give the person in question, who's being offered therapy, a safe place to think and reflect on their experience non-judgmentally. There's a great deal of evidence to indicate that when people are allowed a therapeutic relationship, where they can be listened to, and start to realise that other people are taking their feelings very seriously, they connect their feeling with actions and their offending behaviour. Crime is not senseless.

At their best, prisons can be very supportive in allowing space for women to express themselves and feel heard and be held in the kind of Winnicott notion of the 'good enough mother'. The problem arises with the mental health treatment of offenders when they leave prison. Therapy is effective in prison because

focuses on women in prison through the prism of Holloway. Why Holloway has become the focus for a 'Women's Building' that we've been campaigning for, but also how Holloway and its closure makes visible many of the issues around women in prison in the UK. Meeting people like yourself Pamela, Claire, who's here from 'Women in Prison', and other people involved in the Reclaim Holloway campaign over the last 3-4 years it is evident that Holloway functioned quite differently to other prisons in the UK.

Holloway's location in the metropolis and left-wing borough of Islington, up the road from the Tavistock Trust and Institute, meant that there were many resources, initiatives and support groups working in Holloway, including forensic psychotherapy and the 'Born Inside' project you were running Pamela. Some of this support was facilitated by women's organisations with longstanding relationships to Holloway and based in London including Hibiscus¹ and Women in Prison² all founded in the 1980's by women who had been in prison in Holloway, and more recently Treasures.³ Clean Break⁴ was founded by two women who were inmates at HMP Askham Grange and is based in Kentish Town. These organisations recognise that holistic community support, advice and resources benefit women, not imprisonment.

Many of the support organisations in Holloway weren't mirrored in other prisons and when Holloway closed many of these vital resources were lost. Pamela, you mentioned that only one or two of you continued your therapeutic work in prisons outside of London after Holloway closed because it's a four hour round journey there and back from your home in Islington. Your co-edited book with Jessica Collier, *The End of the Sentence*, is a legacy to the important psychotherapy work that took place in Holloway over many years. The title of the book which you and Jessica generously allowed me to borrow for the exhibition.

- P: Colleagues were absolutely determined to leave a record of the history of psychotherapy and the work we had done in the prison in *The End of the Sentence*. We wanted people to be aware and acknowledge the 25 years of building up the psychotherapy service there. Every Wednesday morning, we would have a referral meeting with all the psychotherapists, the psychologists, probation officers and psychiatrists. We really worked together as a team so that relationships could thrive. Some colleagues referred to moving the women at Holloway to prisons out of London as a kind of ethnic cleansing, as they are so very hard to get to and with travel expensive. Not just for people like me who are getting paid to travel there, but especially for the women's families. Imagine the emotional and physical cost of travelling to Bronzefield and Downview in Surrey. Picture the little children crying to see their mothers, the

exhaustion. How difficult those family meetings are anyway, because it's so upsetting for a mother to see her child for an hour, and then say goodbye.

Holloway offered a central location which was easier to get to and had a sustained history of supporting women. It had years of ongoing conversations, reading, writing, researching, courses, interventions to support women and these cannot be magicked up overnight. The consequence of closing Holloway has decimated what was on offer to hundreds of women. The professionals at Holloway felt the huge demands and needs of the women, particularly in the maternity services. I could see five women at most a day out of three-hundred. We know that women are highly motivated to make psychological change when they're pregnant. They may not feel so great about themselves, and maybe not so worth it, but here comes the baby. However, despite the huge amounts of money it takes to incarcerate a woman, resources were always inadequate, particularly in the maternity services to support these women.

Look at Judy's beautiful film and Laura's Abbot's texts about the mothers speaking and saying, "I didn't feel alone. I felt warm. For the first time in my life my life had purpose".

Here, these women were ready and willing to change, they wanted to be a good mother. Who wakes up at the age of 16 and thinks "I've got the career solution, I want to go to prison?" Whose childhood dream is to be incarcerated? Women in prison yearn, they want, they are so motivated, aren't they Laura? I've never understood why the most radical Tories don't really get on this bandwagon. Think how much money this would save? The loss to humanity of putting people in prison. Think of the £60,000 bill for a prison cell. Think how this money could be better used for earlier intervention and systemic change.

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J: It's something specific to England the way in which we incarcerate. In the Netherlands, they have emptied most of the prisons and are now renting them out to other countries! Norway is another good example. We have a very particular relationship with the prison system in the US and the UK which goes back to the slave trade and our colonial history which prisons emerged from.

A: Surely prisons just find a way and mechanism in society of protecting us. Another aspect is the schooling system, the employment system, the health system. Unless you address that basic fact in society that it's not us and it's not them, you're going to have these mechanisms in every society.

A: So it isn't an us and them fear?

P: I think there are a lot of philosophical aspects to this, which are important. Personally speaking, on some level, I think it gives people a lot of comfort to think that we know where all the bad guys are. They're in prison. That means guess what? We are great. We are okay. I think sometimes there is a feeling that everybody else is the good guys, right? The bad guys, we know who they are, because they're in prison. The greatest writers on these topics, sadly, are not psychotherapists, but novelists. A lot of novelists have written very beautifully and movingly about prisons.

I'll just read you something brief by an American writer Elizabeth Strout, who wrote the book, *My Name is Lucy Barton*. The author sums up the sentiments of *us* and *them* by saying, "how we find ways to feel superior to another person, another group of people, it happens everywhere, all the time, whatever we call it, it's the lowest part of who we are, it is this need to find someone else to put down".

That's the feeling I get about prisons. It's very pertinent to Hitler's treatment of the Jews. We have a group of people that we think are bad, are like reptiles or rodents, they hold all the bad which means we are fine. We shop at Waitrose, everything is okay. Right? If we're honest with ourselves, we/I know that I can have very murderous feelings about people. I can really hate somebody in a big way. I'm a grandmother, a psychotherapist, and sometimes I really just wanted to slap the shit out of one of my kids. I didn't do it, but that doesn't mean that I don't have aspects of that to myself that I can think terrible things. The point of psychotherapy is go ahead and think it. Go ahead and dream it. Just don't do it. That's the point of therapy in prison - that we can think about the feelings and turn them into thoughts and then we're much less likely to act them out.

A: I worked at Clean Break. They produce theatre, as well as having an educational aspect. A lot of emotions are worked through, not necessarily in the head, but through opportunities physically through drama and exercises. What space is there for the arts?

J: This was very particular to Holloway too. In Pamela and Jessica Collier's book *The End of the Sentence*, we hear from psychotherapists, but also contributions from drama therapists and art therapists. There was a huge range of people working with all sorts of therapeutic tools. Katrina MacPherson's film *Symphony*, which is showing in the exhibition, documents a dance theatre movement company over a three to four month period working with women in Holloway to produce dance theatre. Katrina's not here tonight because she's in Scotland, but she did say that the amount of time that they had in the prison to work with the women each day was three to four hours. However, a large part of that time was spent waiting to

see the women, being checked by prison security staff that they weren't bringing anything into the prison and other logistics. These procedures really limited the quality of time they had with the women. The great work that could have happened if time had been spent differently — I'm sure you have this experience, Pamela? There's probably another three hours, three people you could see if the structures were different. Coming back to Holloway, we have on the wall in the exhibition a list of the support organisations that were working in Holloway, that Reclaim Holloway has started archiving.

Pamela, what made Holloway different from other prisons? ... Bearing in mind that there seemed to be so many more services and resources in Holloway, which in my mind should be in the community preventing people landing up in prison, was Holloway more effective than other prisons in supporting women?

P: I really can't answer that because at the time that was the only prison I was working in. When Holloway closed I took the Born Inside project to Bronzefield, which is a private prison near Heathrow and fairly new and squeaky clean. However, Holloway had a well-established and deep-rooted relationship developed over 25 years between professionals working together. It had moved far beyond the days of torturing the suffragettes or demanding that women give birth in chains. The very useful and creative thing about Holloway in its final chapter was the building of therapeutic and multidisciplinary relationships developed over 25 years. We knew each other, and we knew the women. That's really at the bottom of all of this. The capacity for people to have good relationships. It's really, simple. It's just not easy.

J: So there were the support organisations, the therapeutical groups, and then there were the officers and those employed by the Ministry of Justice. What was the relationship between them? We know in the later years before Holloway closed there were deaths on site, such as Sarah Reed.

With the increasing cuts and impoverished resources at Holloway leading up to its closure did this affect the support those incarcerated there had access to?

P: ... I know about suicide. I hate to be pessimistic about this, but I think it's very hard to stop somebody who's really intent on doing it. I don't want to talk about the particular case. But, you know, it is tragic. Suicide is a part of life. Suicide happens in the community. It happens in prisons. I don't know if the rate in prison is higher than the rate in the community. Either way it's tragic. Every professional working in the prison is very aware of the risk of self-harm, and suicide and attempts at suicide that professionals hope won't work. I had a patient who killed herself, a young woman, many years ago when she was transferred to

a different prison. She will be with me forever. I guess that the discouraging sort of final statement is you can't keep people from doing very destructive things, but you can help them understand it. And I think it's the understanding that can help people change and I believe that's possible in prison. I really appreciate people's interest in it because I don't go along with "lock them up and throw away the key". We lose our humanity with the key.

¹Hibiscus supports and empowers vulnerable Foreign Nationals (FNs), Black, Minority Ethnic and Refugees (BMER), primarily women, who are affected by the criminal justice system and immigration restrictions.

²Women in Prison (WIP) is a national charity that delivers support for women affected by the criminal justice system, in prisons, in the community and through Women's Centres. It campaign to end the harm caused to women, their families and communities by imprisonment.

³Treasures Foundation provides safe accommodation in East London and specialist support to women with histories of drug abuse and offending. The foundation works alongside women to enable them to recover, build healthy relationships, learn new skills, reach their full potential and go on to lead fulfilling and independent lives.

⁴40 years ago, Clean Break was founded by two women in prison who believed in the power of theatre to transform lives.



Judy Rabinowitz Price, film stills from *The Good Enough Mother* (2020)