

Review:

The Named and the Nameless: 2018 PEN Prison Writing Awards Anthology

Jenny Albright,
Kalyn Bonn,
Matt Getty,
Zach Marburger,
Brooks Mitchell,
Jake Quinter,
& Shivon Pontious

Colorado State University

Mass incarceration in the United States is deeply entrenched into the political and economic makeup of modern America. In a time of political upheaval and radical change, prison and criminal justice reform activists are turning the public's attention towards the problem of America's prisons and shining a light on the forgotten voices of the incarcerated. Just as the prison is both absent and present in the lives of Americans in so many ways, so too are the voices of those prisoners. The need to make space and hear the voices of those incarcerated people is the call to which *The Named and the Nameless* answers. The end result of PEN's 2018 Prison Writing Contest, *The Named and the Nameless* contains poems, short works of fiction, memoirs, essays, plays, and more, all submitted by incarcerated writers across America. Broken down by genre, the works showcase the incarcerated writers' ability to find humanity in the inhumane and community in a place where walls and bars

separate. Reading their work highlights the chasm between America's prison population and the rest of the country and invites readers to reflect upon what sort of communities that, as a democracy, are being created in our name. As editors Meissner and Pollock explain in the introductory section, our emotional well-being and "health of our greater society" is dependent on our willingness to "engage with each other's humanity" (x). To understand the societal impact of the prison system in America, one must look to the voices of those most affected by its presence. *The Named and the Nameless* presents an opportunity for its writers to be heard and for its readers to listen.

If Meissner and Pollock call on us to "engage with each other's humanity" in reading this collection, it is perhaps because the prison institution in many ways actively works to defy the humanity of its incarcerated people (x). The fiction category texts are prime examples of such resistance to prison systems, which function through dehumanization. Peter Dunne's "An Ungodly Godlike Man" demonstrates that in lingual societies, we *all* are constructed by fictions, by allegory, "built around lies. Lies which soil the psyche, tarnish the world behind our eyes" (7). The text calls attention to the metonymic/rhetorical structures enabling prison economies, of "master" and "slave," the human and subhuman, ordering our identity logic. Rather than perpetuate this model in which the master habitually observes the subhuman, Dunne turns the readers' focus back to the "human," the free people of control societies. The speaker in the story examines not just the condition of the prisoner, but the free who enable imprisonment: "How can you hope to understand me and my teachings when you don't understand *yourself*? Who are *you*?" (18). This piece, like the others in the collection, prompts readers to engage in witnessing humanity through screams of the incarcerated, the voices that shake the walls of the prison, to "share their pain... with the world" (8). These selections call for pedagogy and research models that *listen* to a more comprehensive variety of voices within our societies, a reconsideration of who has valuable knowledge to offer.

The dehumanizing quality of the American justice system makes itself felt not just in society at large but in the intricacies of the interpersonal relationships that develop inside its walls. The essay section of the collection provides further resistance to the

dehumanization apparent in the prison system by exploring the difficulty of maintaining interpersonal relationships both in and out of prison. “Sophia” tells the story of the unlikely friendship between the narrator, James, and a fellow prisoner, Sophia. Their friendship develops despite constant monitoring: “I understood the scrutiny, but really we were just two terrified kids who happened to form a friendship over similar situations and a carton of milk” (127). The connection that Sophia and James forms allows them to transcend their status as prisoners as they work through feelings of guilt and resentment to connect with each other despite their circumstances: “Others may define her by her very worst moments, but I believe in her. I believe in the redemptive value of standing by someone’s side, particularly during the rougher moments in life” (132). “Sophia” reminds readers of the potential for human connection in the most unlikely of circumstances and through the simplest of means, as simple as similar situations and a carton of milk. This section of the collection provides researchers engaged in prison writing and social justice with accounts of human connection in the prison system and calls for attention to the way those relationships develop behind bars.

While many pieces in *The Named and the Nameless* explore interpersonal relationships both within and outside of prison walls, others seem to make a direct appeal to their audience. Within the drama pieces, there are several moments of direct audience involvement. In the play “The Bucket,” which features an eclectic ensemble of inmates in solitary confinement, the character Jacobi challenges the audience, saying, “friends don’t come easy. So let me ask you. Straight up. Are you my friend?” (84). The stage scripts often involve characters speaking directly to the crowd, asking rhetorical questions or making accusations, and the one screenplay frequently places the camera in the point of view of its enigmatic villain. The act of first-hand witnessing already implicit in the convention of theatre becomes particularly poignant when written by and about—and presumably performed by—people whose status as prisoners already affords so little privacy and agency. These unwittingly participatory moments in the scripts compel those on the “outside” to bear witness to the lives of those inside, establishing a commonality of human experience that transcends bars. Moreover, these moments force the audience to move beyond our position as readers, teachers, students, and researchers of prison writing, and to acknowledge our

own complicity in the oppression of incarcerated peoples—and to take responsibility for our active roles in the continuing narrative of mass incarceration.

If the collection comprises a look at the effects of the justice system on society and interpersonal relationships, it also offers pieces that show the effects of incarceration on a personal level. The poetry section of the book is comprised of seven poems in which the authors describe intense emotion and humanity through the anguish of their experiences. In the poem “Insanity,” Vaughn provocatively describes the pain of incarceration as something that completely strips people of their humanity. This leaves those incarcerated as scared bodies and empty souls forced to navigate despair. This theme of embodied pain is continued in the poem “Grace Notes,” in which Mendoza describes his pain as something he constantly struggles with, exhibited through objects in his life. He describes the feelings of isolation and emptiness when there is no opportunity to find closure. Elizabeth Hawes’ “The Glitter Squirrel in Me” provides a moment of levity in the collection, perhaps reflected in the author’s own words: “I am the most dedicated optimism/you ever met, the optimist who stays the course/no matter what” (61). These three poems reflect different intrapersonal experiences of the American prison system—however, they echo the common theme of the collection in the desire to be heard with the complexity and ambiguity of the lives of incarcerated people.

Understanding the impact of the American prison system both in the lives of those it directly affects and in society at large requires hearing the voices of incarcerated people, but it also requires confronting the material realities of prison life itself. The essays in this collection comprise a lesson in swallow migration and a prison’s war against them, a humanizing story about hospice volunteers and breaking out of routine, and a frighteningly sterile third-party view of the state-machine that is death row. Perhaps most hard-hitting is Sterling Cunio’s “Going Forward with Gus,” in which an original effort to break from the monotony of prison life lands the narrator volunteering in the prison hospice, where they accidentally experience human empathy again. Here, in the hospice, an actual community-within-a-community, the narrator discovers empathy again: “And so, on that June night, as I reminded myself that it had

been nearly a decade since I'd been in any kind of trouble that might send me back to the hole, I got dressed...to give someone else what I had craved for so long...human empathy" (35). Other feelings of empathy are echoed in how Michael Lambrix watches the countdown of his fellow death-row inmate Oscar in "Execution Day: Involuntary Witness to Murder," in which the narrator seeks to humanize the antiseptic process of a state-sanctioned execution on Florida's death row. Here, the narrator calls for society to examine the acts that are carried out in our names, asking us as readers to ruminate upon the process of taking a human life. Tension builds as the narrator recounts Oscar's wait to hear of a potential stay of execution from the courts as he counts down the hours to his execution, lamenting the cold, methodical process that Oscar must endure: "Throughout this time, not even for one second are you allowed to forget that they are counting down your last days - and last hours" (48). After Oscar leaves his cell for the final time, the narrator holds a vigil of sorts: "and I got on my knees and I prayed, and yet I couldn't find any words" (51). In the narrator's attempt to bear witness to Oscar's last moments, readers observe the instances of humanity and community among the prisoners on death row.

Collectively, the stories in *The Named and the Nameless* present writing and rhetoric scholars with a picture of incarcerated human life in the American justice system, and yet each piece manages to transcend the walls and bars that confine them to show that there are aspects of the human experience that connect us all, despite our circumstances. In the introduction to the collection, Meissner and Pollock ask "How do we support the voices of those vanished from our society through incarceration? In what ways do the contributions of marginalized writers enrich, challenge, and improve our understanding of the world?" (ix). Each piece in the collection reflects these questions and asks the reader to confront difficult parts of the human experience in some way, and therein lies the power of *The Named and the Nameless* as a collection. In making room for the voices of prison writers, *The Named and the Nameless* resists allowing those voices to vanish from public consciousness and acknowledges the potential for empowerment in sharing those voices with the world. The writing presented in the collection is valuable for community-engaged writing and rhetoric researchers looking to engage with firsthand accounts of the lived experiences of incarcerated people.