

Guest Editors'

Introduction:

Reflections special issue on Prison Writing, Literacies and Communities

Wendy Hinshaw
& Tobi Jacobi

This workshop is our connection to the outside world. A chance for us to be heard, something that teaches us how to connect through our writing.

—SpeakOut writer

Miami inmates are what becomes of the chicken before I fry it up.

—Thant T. Lallamont,
Exchange for Change writer

In recent decades, phrases such as “mass incarceration” and “prison industrial complex” have become part of our national vocabulary, indicating a growing awareness about the cost (in lives and dollars) of maintaining the world’s largest prison population. Indeed, 2019 has seen increased attention to issues of incarceration and justice from both conservative and liberal media sources; yet even as public discourses increasingly criticize the criminal justice system, we maintain the fiction of “crime and punishment” that serves as its basis. At this moment we continue to incarcerate—

and also profit from the incarceration of—those who are our most vulnerable: people of color, asylum-seeking families, the mentally ill, those with severe addictions, and, of course, those without the financial resources to make bail or pay for a thorough defense. Our imaginings about who and why we incarcerate continue to evolve, shaped by the stories we hear and the experiences and perspectives we come to know. Prison writing—writing by and with people in prison—has always been a primary agent in changing public perceptions and inspiring writing and movements for change on the outside on behalf of prisoners. Literacy practices figure at the center of how we learn from, partner with, and work within prisons, and this special issue of *Reflections* examines—and exhibits—writing practices and communities formed in and around prisons.

Those of us who work and write within carceral spaces are eager to share those stories as one tactic for broadening discourse about and educational opportunities for people inside. As scholars and practitioners in prison literacy and writing—Wendy with the Florida-based [Exchange for Change](#) prison writing program and Tobi with the Colorado-based [SpeakOut!](#) writing workshops—we are encouraged and inspired by the wide range of stories and breadth of work that this 2019 special issue makes visible. In 2004, Tobi worked with Patricia O'Connor and *Reflections* founding editor Barbara Roswell to publish a special issue focused on prison literacies, narratives, and community connections. The issue brought together voices of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated writers, prison teachers, researchers, and community members. Fifteen years later, we are pleased to be introducing a second special issue devoted to the study, practice, and support of writing, as well as other kinds of community partnerships and educational opportunities, in prisons and/or other rehabilitative or treatment institutions. Our call for writing elicited an exciting and wide-ranging set of proposals from both outside and inside carceral spaces. The resulting special issue offers a representative range of theoretical, methodological, and narrative essays that report on and grapple with literacy practices and writing moments inside U.S. prisons, jails, and post-incarceration spaces. The issue is organized into three sections: theorizing prison writing, critical collaborations, and recognizing prison histories, identities, and abolitionist possibilities. We are also pleased to feature

reviews of inside and scholarly writing, as well as several pieces of creative work by inside writers.

The first section—theorizing prison writing—grapples with the complexity of writing and representation work behind bars. Chavelo Borden's poem "My Work" opens this issue with a commentary on the power of the pen that rings true for many writers inside, and Christopher Malec offers a narrative perspective on the challenges that people inside face when trying to access educational programming. "More than Transformative: A New View of Prison Writing Narratives," by a collective of inside and outside writers, presses for expanded opportunities for writers inside by situating the work of writing (ranging from initial invention activity to exploration of new genres) within an Illinois prison education program. Other contributions, such as Libby Catchings's essay "Bodily Instruments: Somatic Metaphor in Prison-Based Research," encourage scholars to embrace discursive intention and calls to create shared vocabulary informed by approaches to affect and embodiment.

In 2017, Exchange for Change writers collaborated with the O Miami Poetry Festival and artist Julia Weist to intervene in online search platforms and change the discourse around mass incarceration and incarcerated people. As part of the project [View-Through](#), incarcerated writers composed one-line poems that redefined what "Miami inmates are," and hundreds of supporters on the outside posted and shared them. Incarcerated writers and supporters collaborated to temporarily interrupt and permanently retrain the algorithms that tell us what "Miami inmates are" when we enter it into a search engine. The result? Miami inmates are still many things in any search engine, but among them is the chicken envisioned by Thant T. Lallamont in the epigraph above. Miami inmates are also, of course, many things that search engines can't reveal, and as anyone reading this surely knows, the majority of their experiences are hidden from public view. Collaborations across the razor wire are as tricky as they are necessary, and the issue's second section—critical collaborations—considers the dynamics of partnership and collaboration from multiple standpoints. The section opens with Melissa McKee, who reflects on Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* and the experience in the criminal justice system of being "both hypervisible

and invisible at the same time.” Sarah Moseley demonstrates how a yoga partnership between incarcerated and university students integrates contemplative learning into community writing and community partnership practices. Kathryn Perry and Bidhan Roy use a framework of hospitality to establish an equitable and humanizing partnership between university students and incarcerated writers in the [WordsUncaged](#) program. Taryn Collins, Felice Davis, and Jennifer A. Smith discuss their collaboration with a Seattle-based performance artist, incarcerated women, and university students in creating a multimodal platform, [“Breaking Free While Locked Up,”](#) to reform narratives by and of women working toward recovery while incarcerated.

Many of the writers we have encountered in eighteen years of facilitating writing workshops in jail and prison stay with us. They linger in our minds as we move through the other parts of our days and lives. Their workshop interactions are mirrored in the work our conventional university students perform. Their words of loss echo as we help our children with homework, praise their artwork, and snap photos with the abandon of a person not behind bars. Kya remains particularly vivid. In one workshop, she wrote six-word memoirs with such rigor and speed that we all paused to watch. As they spilled from her pen she demanded attention to women’s bodies, to emotional labor, to love, and to the pain of recovery. She published pages of poems in our journal across many weeks of workshops before she was released. Later, she came nervously to talk with a university capstone class, an event that both celebrated her writing acumen and illuminated the challenge of bridging positions of privilege, identity, and representation. The third section of this special issue grapples with challenging moments of history, identity, and abolitionist possibility through a theme familiar to many scholars who engage in carceral spaces: the relationship between self and institution. Alyssa Knight calls out the potential and necessity of intellectual engagement in her narrative account of participating in a college English class inside. Several essays in the special issue call for renewed attention to interdisciplinary work on prison abolition, particularly those by Rachel Lewis and Celena Todora in this section. Lewis’s essay, “(Anti)Prison Literacy: Queering Community Writing through an Abolitionist Stance” argues for the primacy of “LGBTQ abolitionist literacy practices and the tactical potential

they represent” in her analysis of the “family letter” in Black and Pink’s organizational newsletter. In her essay, “Transforming University-Community Relations: The Radical Potential of Social Movement Rhetoric in Prison Literacy Work,” Todora then turns our attention to radical coalitional rhetoric as a model for moving toward pedagogies of social change—and ultimately, abolition—in the design of literacy-based programs and opportunities inside.

Writing from and about prisons and prison writing programs continues to grow, and the reviews in this issue reflect the multiple sites and directions of our work. Reviews include exciting new scholarship in the field of prison writing and higher education, such as Patrick Berry’s *Doing Time, Writing Lives*, and Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson’s *Prison Pedagogies*. Baz Dreisinger’s examination of global incarceration in *Incarceration Nations* reflects the global contexts that shape incarceration practices. Alongside this scholarship are reviews composed by two sets of students in a graduate seminar on prison writing in America of recent anthologies from the inside, including *The Named and the Nameless: 2018 PEN Prison Writing Awards Anthology* and *Don’t Shake the Spoon*, the literary journal for Exchange for Change. *Feeding the Roots of Self-Expression and Freedom*, the collection of writing and curricular guide by Jimmy Santiago Baca reflects the expanding reach of such writing. Together, the voices represented in these reviews and across this issue show how multifaceted our conversations and approaches must be as we continue to support prison education and literacy within broader social justice and prison abolition goals.

We are hopeful about the small steps at the federal and many state levels toward sentencing reform and improved prison conditions, as well as the potential for increased access to higher education through the expansion of the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program. We are well aware that threats to these changes, just like threats to the programs we work with, can emerge at any time. However, our contributors provide us with a glimpse of all that is happening in our field and our communities right now. For Eric Whitfield, our concluding author, “Today is writing,” and we agree.

We can help the writers develop, but really the most important thing is to offer them a forum to discuss and write about issues that are important to them.—SpeakOut! writing workshop facilitator

Let's talk about then

Let's talk about now

Let's talk about when

When we figure out how

—“Let's talk about” (excerpt) by Pepper Johnson,
SpeakOut! Journal, spring 2018

Wendy Hinshaw is Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing Programs at Florida Atlantic University. She is also a founding board member of Exchange for Change, a Miami-based prison writing organization. Her articles on prison writing, feminist rhetoric, and rhetorics of incarceration have appeared in journals including *JAC*, *Feminist Formations*, and *Community Literacy Journal*, as well collections including *Women, Writing and Prison* and *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*. Her current research focuses on community writing, writing program administration, and barriers to higher education in prisons.

Tobi Jacobi is Professor of English and director of the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University. She has coordinated the SpeakOut! Writing Workshop since its inception in 2005, a program that serves hundreds of confined community writers annually. She has published articles and essays on prison literacy in journals such as *Reflections*, *Community Literacy Journal*, *The Journal of Correctional Education*, *Feminist Formations* and *Radical Teacher* and well as numerous edited volumes. Her co-edited book *Women, Writing, and Prison* appeared in 2014, and she is currently working on a literacy remix project that blends contemporary pedagogy with archival prison texts with Dr. Laura Rogers.