

Our Amalgamated Voices Speak:

Graduate Students and Incarcerated Writers Collaborate for a Common Purpose

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In this essay, the authors describe a collaborative, community-engaged graduate seminar in which students and incarcerated writers worked together to write promotional brochures for WordsUncaged, a prison writing program. Drawing on reflective writing from graduate students and incarcerated writers, the authors apply a hospitality framework to articulate participants' learning and growth. The public nature of the writing task grounded the experience in tangible results, and the circulation of the brochures beyond the classroom led to specific rhetorical growth as participants worked towards a common purpose. The collaborative nature of this learning process also led to different interpretations of voice and language representing individual and collective experiences. This collaboration resulted in a reciprocal humanization for students and incarcerated writers, as students' rhetorical decisions emphasized their incarcerated partner's humanity and, simultaneously, the incarcerated writers felt recognized as human beings. While acknowledging the constraints and limitations of this sort of community engagement, the authors argue that the collaborative and public facets of this experience were central to creating meaningful growth for all participants; indeed, the different ways in which graduate students and incarcerated writers experienced this growth reflect the complex realities of the partnership itself.

As with many collaborations, ours arose serendipitously, through conversations in the English department hallway at California State University, Los Angeles in the summer of 2018. Kathryn was planning her graduate seminar on “The Writing Process” and wanted to incorporate community-engaged writing tasks, and Bidhan, who was running the WordsUncaged (WU) program, saw a need for promotional materials that he did not have time to produce.¹ In what follows, we look at the collaborative and public nature of this experience from the perspectives of the graduate students and the incarcerated writers who worked together (through written correspondence, never face-to-face) to draft four brochures advertising WordsUncaged. The complex structure of this partnership, in which the participants included Kathryn, the graduate students in her seminar, Bidhan, and the incarcerated writers in WordsUncaged, created a layered landscape of work in which the differentiated access and long-distance communication contributed to the particular kinds of growth that took place (see Figure 1 in appendix). The hospitable space of this collaborative public writing project prevented a limited, guarded exchange in which our community partners simply became a strategy for achieving student learning outcomes, enriching student experience or, worse still, reduced our incarcerated partners to the recipients of self-serving, asymmetrical charitable acts. The collaborative relationships and the public nature of the writing project allowed for all participants, students and incarcerated writers, to recognize their individual and collective voices, to make rhetorical decisions that gave shape to these voices, and to produce tangible documents advocating a common purpose and shared humanity.

Although plenty of scholarship within the field of rhetoric and composition recognizes the value of collaborative writing, from arguing for the collaboration inherent in any writing task (Lunsford and Ede 2012) to addressing the complexities of collaborative writing in educational, extracurricular, and interdisciplinary settings (Moss et al 2004), there is a need for more research on collaborative

1 WordsUncaged is a platform for incarcerated men and women to dialogue and critically engage with the world beyond the prison walls. Housed within Cal State LA and founded by Bidhan, WordsUncaged has also led to the only face-to-face bachelor's degree completion program in California for incarcerated individuals. Please visit <http://www.wordsuncaged.com> for more information.

writing in graduate student pedagogy (not to mention a need for more research on graduate student writing, see Micciche and Carr 2011; Ritter 2017). There has also been increased attention to prison literacy and education (Hartnett 2011; Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 2018), and more calls for community engagement in and beyond writing classrooms (Parks 2016; Rousculp 2014). Given the relative absence of collaborative writing in graduate school as well as the need for more public-facing writing tasks involving local communities, we decided to design a graduate seminar in order to create an opportunity for both traditional academic writing and learning and collaborative writing engaged with those outside of the classroom. The seminar represented an opportunity for all of us to consider the connections and differences between these two contexts. In the first half of the course, students brought in a previous piece of academic writing and underwent intensive workshops and revision, focusing on the integration of secondary-source material in order to build their own analysis or interpretation. Students also moved through the logistics of identifying a target journal, writing an abstract, and even responding to their peers' drafts from the perspective of journal editors. In other words, their target audience was made as real as possible through these exercises and workshops.

In the second half of the course, students worked in groups to create brochures for the WordsUncaged program.² We had four brochures: the first aimed at an audience of Cal State LA students in order to advertise the WU program and encourage students to participate; the second aimed at the general public with the goal of advertising the WU radio show that airs twice monthly from Lancaster prison; the third geared towards family members of the incarcerated with the purpose of informing them of WU, encouraging them to submit work, and helping to reduce the stigma of having incarcerated relatives; and the fourth aimed at a wider audience of other prisoners throughout California, with the purpose of informing them about WU and encouraging them to submit creative work. This part of the course shared the same goals as the first academic writing

2 Kathryn notes that combining both "academic" and "public" writing in one graduate seminar was a pedagogical challenge and, in their evaluations, students commented on how much work the course entailed, and several wished they had been able to spend more time on their academic projects. Moving forward, it is worth considering alternatives, such as creating a new course devoted solely to community-engaged, "public" writing.

portion: to maintain and develop audience awareness, to represent others' ideas and perspectives in their writing, and to continue working collaboratively. Similarly to how they had to draw on secondary-source material for their articles, students also needed to represent the perspectives of the incarcerated writers in the brochures. Students collaborated both with each other and with the incarcerated writers as Bidhan ferried hard copies of feedback back and forth between the classroom and Lancaster prison. Collaborative writing is common, whether in the life of a professional academic or an alt-ac career, yet it often gets overlooked in graduate school, as the focus remains on single-authored seminar papers.

As we reflect on how this collaboration played out, we pursue this project for similar reasons to Erin Castro and Mary Gould (2018) as they write of the need to reconsider the impetus behind higher education in prison. Rather than limiting the purpose of higher education in prison to the “narrow pragmatism” of reducing recidivism, the authors pose this question: “Why is it that we would imagine one kind of higher education for a particular group of people (non-incarcerated) and another kind of higher education for a different group of people (currently incarcerated)?” (6). In echoing their question, we point out that the collaboration between graduate students and incarcerated writers led to a richness of learning for everyone involved, and this learning seemed to defy prescriptive assumptions about the purpose of higher education for one particular group or another. We cannot elaborate in as much detail as we would like regarding the exact nature of this learning, given the specific scope of this project. We base this analytical reflection on the reflective writing produced by both graduate students and incarcerated writers at the end of the semester as well as our own individual experiences throughout the course. Further work—and future incarnations of this partnership—should consider prisons as sites of learning, as Joe Lockard and Sherry Ranksins-Robison (2018) call for in their introduction to *Prison Pedagogies*, with their own specific pedagogical frameworks and needs.

To frame this particular instance of collaborative work between incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals, we use the metaphor

of hospitality. As Janis and Richard Haswell (2015) describe it, in the nomadic tradition of hospitality, the roles of host/guest are transitory, each is open to being transformed by the other, and there can be “easeful communication” free from rigid constraints and expectations of the traditional academic environment. We saw some of these qualities in the long-distance collaboration between students and incarcerated writers, as the relationship work and the public-facing nature of the writing project turned the learning environment into a more open one. Indeed, what participants learned echoed the hospitable emphasis on the shared humanity of host/guest for teacher/student: “I am uplifted when you are uplifted, advanced when you are advanced. Similarly, what dehumanizes you dehumanizes me” (55). The risk-taking of this hospitable space took not only the form of “sacred substitution,” in which one “...sacrifices...one’s own space in order to create an empty space in which someone else can achieve his or her potential” (179), but also a *sacred recognition* as the participants worked towards a common purpose in composing the brochures. In what follows, we examine the written reflections from graduate students and incarcerated writers to understand how the hospitable space of this collaborative writing project created 1) a specific sort of sacred substitution and recognition through varying interpretations of “voice,” and 2) a discovery of shared humanity. We then examine students’ rhetorical growth through public writing. The voices represented here—of non-incarcerated graduate students and of currently incarcerated writers—show us how a hospitable environment presupposes human equality between participants, regardless of social status or cultural identity, and therefore enables community engagement within a prison context to be a deeply humanizing experience for all participants. We argue that this humanizing experience hinges upon a collaborative writing project that grounded it in material conditions and provided tangible artifacts that had utility beyond the class for WordsUncaged participants.

WHOSE VOICES?

A challenge of collaborative writing is deciding whose voices, and in what form, make it into the written product. Students typed up questions for the Lancaster writers, initiating an exchange of information as Bidhan carried these questions into the prison and

then carried out the incarcerated writers' responses. These responses indicated that the incarcerated writers knew that their words would become content for the brochures. For example, one Lancaster response was prefaced with: "Thank you for assisting in the production of a WordsUncaged brochure. To help broaden the perspectives, I asked various individuals to answer the questions. Below are answers. You may use any part of the answers as quotes." Other responses took the literal shape of a brochure as the incarcerated writers tri-folded orange paper and handwrote content (see Figures 2 and 3 in appendix for examples of the incarcerated writers' brochure content and the corresponding brochure students created). The incarcerated writers provided many pages of information about WU, their own perspectives and experiences, and ideas for the layout as they corresponded with students. What emerged from this process was a distinct difference in how students and incarcerated writers approached the concept of voice within this context: while students tended to understand voice as individualized and dependent upon nuanced language choices, incarcerated writers emphasized the political, collective dimensions of voice.

Based on the graduate students' reflections, this question of voice was complicated by issues of representation and language difference. Overwhelmingly, when asked whose voices were represented in the brochures, the students said that the incarcerated writers' voices were represented and that students did not want their own voices to be in the brochures. Students tended to recognize their own voices more in terms of the rhetorical choices they had to make in composing these brochures. Liliana wrote, "I think the incarcerated writer's voice is the loudest in the brochure." Andy noted that "my words aren't there...they exist in the margins," while Sarah wrote "I felt really determined to amply hold me back from the brochure in favor of more from the WU writers." Kymberli echoed this: "If we did it right, then the incarcerated writers' voices are the ones that are represented and ours are more in the background," and Kirsten said, "my group and I tried to honor the original voices. We worked meticulously to collage and collect the voices and then give them free reign to 'dialogue' in our pamphlet." Valerie said that "We tried to preserve the feelings, thoughts, and voices of both the incarcerated writers and the student participants of WordsUncaged," while agreeing that "I didn't necessarily see *my* voice represented in the brochure...but I

think that was the point.” Maria wrote: “I don’t see my voice. I see the brochure as voices amalgamated, made one through the space of the brochure.”

Students, for the most part, saw the need to evacuate their own voices—their own words—from the text in order to make space for the incarcerated writers; in other words, students participated in this act of “sacred substitution” that Haswell and Haswell identify as key to a hospitable, common space by absenting themselves from the physical space on the brochure panel to make room for the words of the writers. In terms of the actual language, most students agreed that they wanted to preserve the exact language from the incarcerated writers (that they had received in letter form from Lancaster); some students, however, mentioned that they did edit the direct quotations for grammar and concision.

When asked about how they handled issues of language difference, a few students mentioned that they didn’t see any difference. Eylaf wrote, “I don’t think we had any issues with language difference,” while Kymberli agreed that “I actually was not aware of any language difference. The voices of the writers and my voice seemed to be saying similar things in a similar way.” Other students wrote that they deliberately kept the exact language of the incarcerated writers. Kirsten explained:

Our group members were very particular about preserving the original voices, even if those voices represented themselves and their ideas with diverse grammars...We edited mostly for space – not grammar or content. We NEVER put our words into the mouths of anyone we represented and quoted. I am reminded of the Harris quote: “To transform is to reshape, not to replace or rebut.”

This was a common attitude that students expressed towards preserving the “original” voices of the incarcerated writers. Sarah wrote that her group “attempted to use as much of [the incarcerated writers’] own words and language as possible throughout the brochure,” and Denise said that her group “saw the importance of representing the original experiences of these men.” Valerie

explained that, “as far as preserving the voices and styles of the quotes we did pull, we avoided making any grammatical changes to anything the writers said.”

Some groups, however, experienced more ambivalence. Liliana described the conflict she experienced when her peers wanted to “respect the voices of the incarcerated men and represent their ideas faithful to the wording in which they were delivered,” but she “felt that as English grad students, we had the ability to express the idea in more precise language and should alter the wording where we saw fit.” She concluded with the resolution that “I am only here to facilitate that communication [between the incarcerated men and the public]...and we shouldn’t stress about the wording.”

A couple of groups did edit the incarcerated writers’ language. Andy reflected on his group’s editing choices:

An issue that came up constantly was our desire to “fix” the inconsistencies and grammatical errors in the writing. This resulted in paraphrasing and omission of quotations to create a consistency of ideas. However, on occasion we decided that it was best to leave those voices intact, as they were intended depending on the nature of the idea being communicated. Some of those ideas and meanings extend beyond grammar itself.

The differences in how students approached issues of language difference reflect the complex relationship between language, identity, and audience. Students recognized the significance of maintaining the brochure panels for the incarcerated writers’ words as opposed to their own, and they also recognized the need to edit language for rhetorical impact. Based on conversations with WordsUncaged members, Bidhan noticed that participants were less concerned about these editorial decisions of language, and often held the expectation that students would “fix” their grammar. Despite this, students were aware that these rhetorical decisions arose not only from the collaborative nature of this writing task, but also from students’ recognition of the unequal power dynamics at play within this collaboration. The incarcerated writers could not, on their own terms, write these brochures and get their words and experiences

circulated beyond the Lancaster prison walls. But the graduate students could and, thus, their desire to faithfully convey the writers' stories had significant consequences on the shape of the brochures and the language used therein. The variety of students' rhetorical choices regarding language also points to the value of the tension inherent in any collaborative writing task; students had to deal with their different approaches to issues of language in ways that allowed them to see the project through to its end.³

In fact, the incarcerated writers did not see voice in the same way the graduate students did. Our incarcerated partners in the project understood voice in a collective, rather than individualized, frame and emphasized political rather than stylistic or syntactical elements of voice more than the Cal State LA students. Interestingly, within the prison context, voice was seen as fluid and not "owned" by an individual. What seemed to be at work here, for WordsUncaged participants, was not so much a process of sacred substitution as articulated by Haswell and Haswell but, rather, something akin to a process of *sacred recognition* through common purpose. Voice, within this process of sacred recognition, is not understood as a privatized writing style, owned by a particular individual; rather, voice is understood as creating a textual space in which you are able to see yourself in recognition of a common purpose. This process of sacred recognition led participants to their own voices and experiences represented by other incarcerated writers and artistic works, as well as by political thinkers who shared their broad objective of liberation, even if they did not share their experiences of incarceration. The comments of WU participant James were particularly illuminating in this regard:

I was able to see my voice represented vicariously through an unknown artist's depiction of a woman seemingly shedding aspects of her inauthentic self; with a quote from educational thinker Paolo Freire dedicating support to the oppressed, as well as those at their side teaching them how to become actualized.

3 It is unclear whether students and incarcerated writers communicated explicitly about the question of language and editing. In writing this piece, we relied on the reflective writing produced by students and incarcerated writers at the end of the course, and this writing did not indicate how they addressed this question. In future collaborations, we plan to scaffold more direct questions regarding language and representation into the structure of the project.

For all participants, the brochures were seen as part of WordsUncaged's bigger mission to empower and amplify the voices of incarcerated men and women. As WU participant Lashwan notes:

The voices represented are those from behind the walls. These brochures are the voice of the voiceless! For many years our voices had no platform that would allow us to be heard; we do now! I see my voice represented as an agent for change for oppressed people and incarcerated people in particular.

Interestingly, Lashawn goes on to passionately frame these current voices within a much broader historical context of men and women fighting to have their voices heard from prison:

There have always been voiceless men and women in the belly of this beast (prison). The platforms we build today to amplify our voices are built on the shoulders of sacrifice of those who came before us. The men and women who have never had the opportunity to share in the fruits of their sacrifices. Power to the People! All people!

Yet, while voice was overwhelmingly understood in a collective, political sense—as a struggle for rights and recognition as a human being, with very little attention paid to the more individualized, aesthetic and syntactical concerns of the Cal State LA students—the uniqueness of individual voices was nonetheless acknowledged. WU participant Daniel articulates this viewpoint very well by writing: “every person has a voice and every voice tells a story and every story illustrates a life and every life is filled with valuable people, whose voices illustrate the endless grandeur of life. Don’t forget the power we hold in our voices, and don’t forget that each voice is unique.” What seemed to be at work for the WordsUncaged participants then, was not so much a disregard for individualized expression but, rather, as Terry comments, a process of creation that “took the meaning of everyone’s input and put it into a universal context” in an effort to represent all incarcerated peoples.

What we learned from these different approaches was that each helped shape the brochures in different ways. On one hand, the students' emphasis upon voice as language choice contributed to the aesthetic quality of the brochures and demonstrated to their incarcerated partners the value of their words and the attention with which they had been read. On the other hand, incarcerated writers reminded students that the brochures were not simply individualized aesthetic texts and that the concept of voice could be understood differently within different contexts, as well as within different purposes of writing. It was not a matter of reconciling these different approaches to voice but, rather, allowing both to inform each other, in order to make the brochures as effective as possible. In retrospect, these different conceptions of voice would have been a rich point for students and their incarcerated partners to discuss further during the class, and certainly one that we will foreground more in our next collaboration.

COLLABORATION AS HUMANIZATION

The learning context in which our classes took place was more complex than the traditional college English classroom that Haswell and Haswell address. The dynamics of the context included Bidhan and the WordsUncaged class at the prison, exchanges between Bidhan and Kathryn and her class, as well as direct exchanges between the WordsUncaged class and Cal State LA students. Within this context, hospitality is not simply an approach that hinged upon the notion of "sacred substitution" within a single classroom; it is not exclusively a dynamic between a professor and her students but, rather, a multilayered interaction between a range of people in very different contexts and with very different roles and relationships to the outcomes of the writing class. Added to this complexity is the fact that prison as an institution is, by design, hostile to the practice of hospitality. Interactions between students and their incarcerated partners were therefore limited to writing, and face-to-face interactions or even email exchanges were not possible during the class.

Given the complexity of this collaborative context, as well as the limitations put upon us by the prison, we were interested in how the process was experienced by the WordsUncaged partners and what

this experience might suggest of the possibilities and limitations of the practice of hospitality within a prison learning context. As WordsUncaged participants reflected upon the process, the most common and significant theme to emerge was that of shared humanity. Haswell and Haswell (2015) reflect upon true hospitality as “the receptive and compassionate state of mind that deep down the stranger shares our humanness” (8). The power of this approach to interacting with an unknown other within a prison context should not be underestimated. The title of the inaugural WordsUncaged book is *Human* because the most important idea that the incarcerated contributors wanted to convey was simply that they were human beings—flawed human beings (like us), who had made some terrible, damaging decisions to be sure—but human beings nonetheless. It is not news to say that prison is a dehumanizing space by design, and this dehumanization is experienced through numerous mundane ways for prisoners every day, such that it becomes normalized in their lives as the years pass. Therefore, to have an extended exchange with an unknown Other outside of prison that is based upon respect and openness toward the Other, as well as the presupposition of mutual human value, is a significant counterpoint to the dehumanization of prison. At the same time, the pedagogical commitment to “complex, interactional, mutually enriching relationships” (7), which Haswell and Haswell identify as central to a hospitable pedagogy, becomes an approach that prevents university-community engagement acting *upon*, rather than *with*, the community with whom they are engaging.

This sense of a shared humanness emerged among the writings of our incarcerated partners in two different ways. One was the sense of shared humanity that was produced through the process of creating the brochures together. WordsUncaged participants were quick to note the care and effort that Cal State LA students put into the brochures, which signaled respect and value to them. For example, Dortell wrote that “when we share the content of their letters, we are amazed by their knowledge and understanding, their empathy and openness,” while Justin wrote that “I was honored and privileged to help” and Dara added that “writing to the students gave me a sense of purpose to be able to help.” This practice of mutual respect and care from WordsUncaged participants and Cal State LA students toward the production of the brochures was foundational to the recognition

of a shared, common humanity because of the collaborative nature of the exchange and the value that each group saw in the others' participation.

WordsUncaged participant Thaison summed up his experience of this process in the following way:

I think the letters exchanged were a very enriching experience. It allowed me to get more in touch with my humanity as I developed a natural human connection with someone from a different culture than my own: the culture that I was raised in as well as the one in which I currently exist.

WU participant Kicking Horse read the process a little differently and offered an approach to deep listening that confirmed a sense of shared humanity: "We all belong to one race...the human race. This is a familiar idea to all stories. If we listen with our hearts and not just our ears, then we will understand all voices." While Macio regarded the "positive light" in which the brochures represented himself and other WordsUncaged participants as an important step in recognition of himself and other incarcerated men and women as "human beings with gifts and talents to be shared with humanity: we have something positive to contribute to society." Tyson summed up the process as "a wonderful and great opportunity for students and incarcerated men alike," and Jarret commented that the process was "helpful to my growth as a human being."

This was echoed in the students' comments, as Sarah pointed out the powerful effect of her group's word choice on her own perspective:

We used "incarcerated writer(s)" rather than call them "inmates" or "prisoners," as it was the description they used themselves and what they preferred. Keeping that in mind, we (I) changed our (my) own perspective on the participants—the negative connotations connected with "inmate" or "prisoner" began to fade as thinking of them as just *people* was fore-fronted. Language is a powerful tool, and if it can do that within a couple of weeks for us, imagine what it could do to the world.

These comments demonstrate the transformative potential that collaborative writing holds within a prison context for writers on both sides of the wall; collaborative writing represents a space of humanization by allowing the categories of prisoner and student to be temporarily replaced by the shared category of writers working for a common purpose.

PUBLIC WRITING AS COMMON PURPOSE

While the value of collaborative writing is evident in the previous pages—namely, the hospitable practices of “sacred substitution” and sacred recognition that emerged from the students and incarcerated writers and the corresponding common space of a shared purpose and humanness—the public nature of this particular writing assignment added an even more meaningful dimension. Scholarship on public writing recognizes its value (Mathieu 2005; Deans 2000), and the particular circumstances of this engaged project called for writing that would reach a broader audience beyond the classroom so that our hospitable approach allowed for engagement beyond the affective and relational (though of course, those aspects were significant). In order for the incarcerated partners to avoid becoming the passive recipients of charitable acts or to function only as the means for students’ learning, the writing task needed to result in tangible materials that would circulate within and beyond both the classroom and Lancaster prison.

Indeed, the public nature of the writing task was a key factor in students’ rhetorical growth. In producing these four brochures, students were especially vigilant in their word choice, wanting to use terms that would represent the incarcerated writers and their language preferences while also appealing to a public audience. In other words, students’ lexical awareness showed a kind of hospitality in the sense that they chose certain terms carefully in order to create a welcoming space for both the incarcerated writers and the target brochure audience. Maria explained quite eloquently how her group approached their decision about what to call the incarcerated writers. The quote is included in its entirety to give a sense of the process that most groups went through while making these rhetorical decisions:

The “public writing” half of the course was very fruitful. I learned how to be hyperaware of my vocabulary and mediate the multiple meanings and connotations of words with my intentions. I know we have talked extensively about the use of the word “inmate,” but I think it is worth mentioning again. When we started the brochure, we were trying to stay away from the word “prisoner,” so we figured the word “inmate” carried a better set of affective connotations. Little did we know the opposite was true. The former LWOP visitors explained to us that the word is imposed on them and it has a very negative set of connotations. In other words, they do not identify with the word. If we would have used the word “inmate” in our brochure, we would have perpetuated a culture of oppression within prison walls. In other words, this brochure showed me the power of words to create culture.

Other groups expressed similar experiences and similar hospitable decisions about their lexical choices in light of the incarcerated writers’ preferences. Valerie said of her group (which used quotes from student volunteers who had worked with WordsUncaged): “For consistency and out of respect for the incarcerated writers, we avoided using quotes that reflected words like ‘inmate.’” Students’ respect for the lexical preferences of the incarcerated writers shows us that this hospitable “making space” for the writers’ voices and preferences not only made space for their voices, it also shaped students’ perceptions of the incarcerated writers as well as brought home for students the rhetorical power of word choice in a document intended to reach a public audience (as Maria pointed out).

Not only were students more aware of their diction, they also demonstrated increasingly nuanced rhetorical awareness, which seems to be one of the primary pedagogical benefits of this public writing experience. Students were faced with a constant series of rhetorical choices—editing and revision—in order to fit their content within the limited space of the brochures in ways that would still appeal to their target public audiences. Andy wrote: “I felt specifically challenged in finding a way to communicate ideas in a short and concise manner while also preserving the voices of the people that the brochure was meant to represent.” Valerie noted that “Being concise is an issue for me across the board, and it was an issue for everyone

in my group simply because of our limited space but big message,” while Sarah noticed a similar struggle in her group: “we had to be more direct than ever to fit our work into such a small platform. The wording had to be less passive, with less long descriptive passages and more to the point.” Kristen discussed the issue of concision as well as target audience: “The challenges faced had mostly to do with selecting material and arranging it in the limited space available while still engaging the passerby in the pamphlet. I think we achieved that, but it took a great deal of sharing, conversation, and development, and LOTS of editing.” Maria saw improvement in her other writing that she attributed to working on the brochures: “I have noticed an improvement in my academic writing, and I think the precision and intention that goes behind writing a brochure has been a significant reason I improved.”

We also see the development of students’ rhetorical savvy when it comes to their audience awareness. Having to write for an audience beyond the classroom had quite an impact on students’ learning, both in terms of their rhetorical development and in terms of their personal investment in the project. Sarah explained the challenge of addressing a non-academic audience in terms of language:

The largest challenge in this portion of the class was audience awareness. Having to acknowledge that we were not writing for the typical academic audience or college professor proved to be difficult...We worked hard at making our work *accessible* in a way that didn’t use an elevated, stuffy, bourgeois style that men smoking pipes in their personal libraries may have written in. I think we all succeeded in addressing that audience.

Kirsten explained how her group put a great deal of effort into imagining their target audience and the physical spaces where they would encounter the brochure, and “that visualizing really helped us to develop the postcard concept for the pamphlet and to connect the product we were producing to a specific person in our minds—so I felt like I really grew as a writer for a target audience.”

Eylaf wrote about how her notion of what her audience knew about her topic changed throughout the course: “My writing changed

because I used to write from a known perspective. I used to write as if the readers already know my topics. I changed that. I started to write as if the reader is across the sea.” Andy also wrote about becoming more aware of his target audience, as he shifted from understanding “writing to be a solitary act” to “attempting to understand the larger conversations that occur around the topic that I am writing about... this was also something that I had to consider during the brochure as I had to take into consideration how the work of WordsUncaged might be perceived by the general public.”

Students were also clearly more engaged in the brochure because they knew it would reach a “real-world” audience besides their professor. Jackie wrote that “I realized I was more excited to write if someone else besides my professor was going to read it. The brochure was just as challenging as the academic paper, but I had fun writing and collaborating because I knew it was going to be read by others.” Isabel explained: “Working on the WordsUncaged brochure, I realized my writing may actually go out into the world and I may actually have a discussion with somebody else...It is meant to make a difference, and I think I will start thinking in that manner regarding my future assignments.” Denise echoed this engagement in even stronger terms:

I think my success with this piece came from realizing that I was serving a larger purpose out there, and that other people would see it...I began to see my work as meaningful. After my group and I finished our brochure I felt different. Like I WAS capable of producing something and helping a larger cause. Before the public writing I felt left out, and like I didn’t belong.

Students experienced deeper emotional engagement due to the specific, public audience for the brochures and the potential for further-reaching consequences than a traditional seminar paper. The “larger purpose” that Denise pointed out echoes the incarcerated writers’ sacred recognition of a common purpose.

The positive affective outcomes of public writing described by students such as Denise were experienced in a different way by incarcerated participants. While the simple act of writing collaboratively with students was in and of itself humanizing for incarcerated participants,

the public writing component of the project amplified a sense of shared humanity through the hope that the brochures would serve as invitations to be seen as human beings by their intended audiences. Michael articulated this desire very clearly by commenting:

What I want people to remember is that there are people who see humanity in us: we who have been told many times over that we are not normal, animals or a menace to society. That even prisoners, within ourselves, have discovered or are discovering our humanity and lending helping hand to benefit others, while also serendipitously bettering ourselves and becoming our best selves.

Similarly, James hoped that audiences were able to recognize the brochures as evidence of “men in the process of changing into men that they always believed they were capable of becoming: remorseful, caring, sensitive and thirsty to help others.” Thiason hoped that “the art displayed in the brochures shows readers that there is untapped talent in prison and the personal written words of Chris Moore show the sincerity that still exists in the human spirit.” While Tyson hoped that they would remind people that “in life you have a purpose and your experiences in life are all to highlight this purpose.”

This emphasis upon a collective, political approach to voice is not surprising given the radically different contexts between Cal State LA graduate students and WordsUncaged participants, the majority of whom had life without the possibility of parole sentences. Students were motivated by respecting the individual voices of the men in the program in ways that echoed Haswell and Haswell’s (2015) approach to sacred substitution “where one sacrifices one’s own space in order to stand in another’s space and help them grow as a singular being” (179). In this understanding, the space that is opened up through this act of hospitality is a “multiple common space” (178). But for the WordsUncaged participants, the purpose of the writing process and brochures is not one of individual expression but of collective action. The singularity of a life without the possibility of parole sentence supersedes any difference in individual experience or expression; the space that is needed in order to foster growth as a “singular being” for the WordsUncaged participants is, therefore, a challenge to

their shared status as prisoners. Within a prison context then, and particularly for those sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, the idea of a common discursive space is understood not so much as a “multiple common space” but, rather, more as a singular space of common purpose. From the perspective of our incarcerated partners, hospitality is perhaps best understood as an invitation to join the singular purpose of challenging our current system of mass incarceration, in order to create the conditions of possibility in which they might be able to act, speak, and write in meaningfully individualized ways. Given this purpose, the stylistic aspects of brochures were largely judged by their ability to convey this purpose clearly and directly and appeal to each specific audience. For example, Daniel noted that the “language was not esoteric, ambiguous or pretentious,” Macio thought that the language “is clear, straight to the point and concise” and that “the brochure clearly identifies its audience and targets its message and invitation to get involved,” while James considered the quotations to be profound and relevant, fitting nicely together in a “unity of purpose!”

The unity of purpose that James identifies was significant not only for incarcerated writers but, also, as Denise and others previously noted, to our Cal State LA students as well. Participation in WordsUncaged produced a palpable affective dimension to the class that provided added motivation for students and led to deeper engagement with rhetorical devices and, ultimately, a richer learning experience. For our WordsUncaged participants, the process was not only a deeply humanizing experience but one that provided tangible materials that will help WordsUncaged’s systemic challenge to mass incarceration in small, but significant ways in the future. We might read the mutuality of this exchange within the framework of hospitality as an “exchange of gifts” between two groups of strangers that has led to “new experiences and new knowledge” for both groups (Haswell and Haswell 2015, 6).

Yet it is important to reiterate that the mutuality of this exchange was dependent upon a collaborative writing project that grounded it in material conditions. Without this grounding of public writing, a hospitable approach to the class might have been “corrupted” in the various ways that Haswell and Haswell identify because the

transformative experience could have easily favored students over incarcerated participants. In other words, meaningfully collaborative public writing guarded against a limited and strategic exchange in which our community partners simply became a means for achieving student learning outcomes and enriching student experiences or, worse still, reduced our incarcerated partners to the recipients of self-serving, asymmetrical charitable acts. But while community writing offered a way of collaborating with incarcerated writers that addressed their needs, as well as the pedagogical experience of the students, this mutuality of hospitality was experienced in different ways by participants. Both Cal State LA students and incarcerated participants reported an expanded sense of humanization as a result of the collaboration, with the experience proving to be particularly impactful for incarcerated WordsUncaged participants. The learning process was skewed toward students, who identified enriched understandings of voice and audience as the most notable learning outcomes of the collaboration. The public writing component of the collaboration was central to this learning process for students, who noted the importance of the “real-world” circulation of the brochures and the responsibility they felt toward their incarcerated partners as deepening their understanding of the rhetorical context; for incarcerated participants, knowing that the brochures served a purpose beyond the classroom was essential to their experience of collaboration, but the project was experienced less as an individual learning experience and more as a practical act of self-representation on behalf of all incarcerated individuals.

Nevertheless, despite the mutuality of this exchange, it would be misleading to suggest that it was equal or parallel for students and incarcerated participants. The public writing component of the collaboration certainly went some way to addressing some of the ethical issues of conducting university-community engagement projects in a prison setting by addressing the needs of our community partners as well as our students. Yet, the constraints and restrictions placed upon incarcerated participants in prison limited their ability to communicate and exchange ideas with their partners on their volition and in their own terms. In a different way, the constraints and expectations of participating in a graduate-level English class also shaped the collaboration through the expectations of grades, learning outcomes, and academic conventions. Despite these shortcomings,

the positive outcomes of this collaboration, for all involved, indicate that collaborative community writing offers an effective pedagogical approach to addressing some of the ethical challenges of student community-based learning with incarcerated partners.

Finally, we might note that academic conventions not only shaped the collaboration itself but also how we have been able to represent participants' voices within this paper. We have found ourselves having to explicate and frame our collaborators' voices to a greater degree than we would have liked in order to satisfy the expectations of the context in which we are writing. In this way, we experienced many of the same challenges and decisions that our students faced, as we navigated ethical issues of voice and representation within the confines of academic writing. So now it is time to free ourselves from academic constraints and conventions because, as Haswell and Haswell note, meaningful hospitality requires taking risks and relinquishing control on the part of the hosts. And so, what remains for us to do, in a final act of hospitality, is to thank our partners from Cal State LA and the Los Angeles County prison for the gifts that they have exchanged with us in our time together, and to create space in this paper for them to say their final words, without the confines of our academic framing, as we all go our different ways.

FINAL WORDS, AS COMPOSED BY SAMUEL NATHANIEL BROWN, ON BEHALF OF THE WORDSUNCAGED COLLECTIVE:

What is our purpose for this anomalous unity? Is it to chip away at the pillars of miseducation and hate that uphold the gender discrimination, class subjugation, racial segregation, and mass incarceration, which plague our collective community? Is the endgame of this endeavor to abolish penalogical forevers in favor of nevers—to be academically clever, social reformist, and criminal justice trendsetters? Or, to diametrically evolve humanity into something better?

If it is the latter, what betterment are we in pursuit of: better writers, better students, better prisoners, better journals, better sequels, better salaries, better sentences, better cars? Nah, we envision better people. In our shared humanity and sacred substitution, we just want

to see people be their best. If optimizing potential is our goal, how then do we measure our success?

Swimming pools are measured in feet, football fields are measured in yard; times of convenience should not be the ruler for measuring character, but rather times that are hard. We measure a human being by what they treasure and claim, how their legend remains to edify their remains and bring clarity to the vision with which they came. WordsUncaged is a multi-mediated medium for singing songs of heroes unsung—where a few first changed their minds and then embraced the task of changing the minds of the many, one by one.

So what is our purpose for this unity, this sacred substitution, this collaborative writing, this barefoot trek through the blistering sands of critical pedagogy? Our amalgamated voices speak into existence the realization of a shared legacy; one in which we evolved beyond the many languages of division to become fluent in the words and ways of equality. Syllabic Liberty. Words Uncaged.

Samuel Nathaniel Brown
January 1, 2019

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APPENDIX

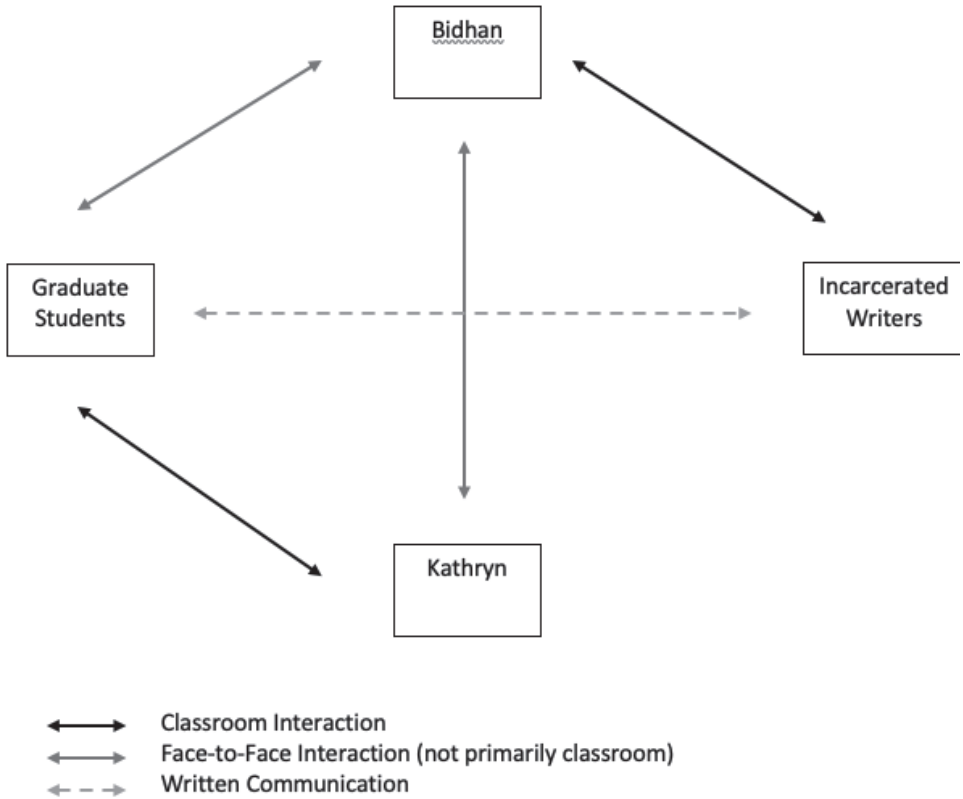


Figure 1

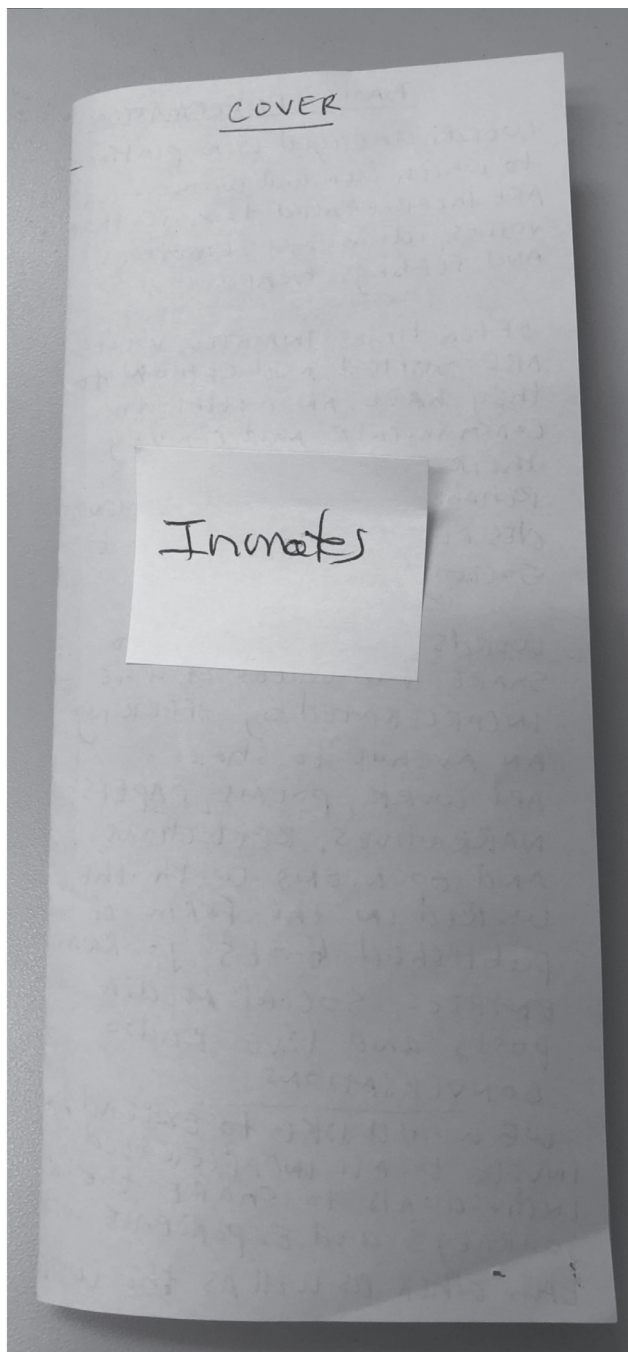


Figure 2-1

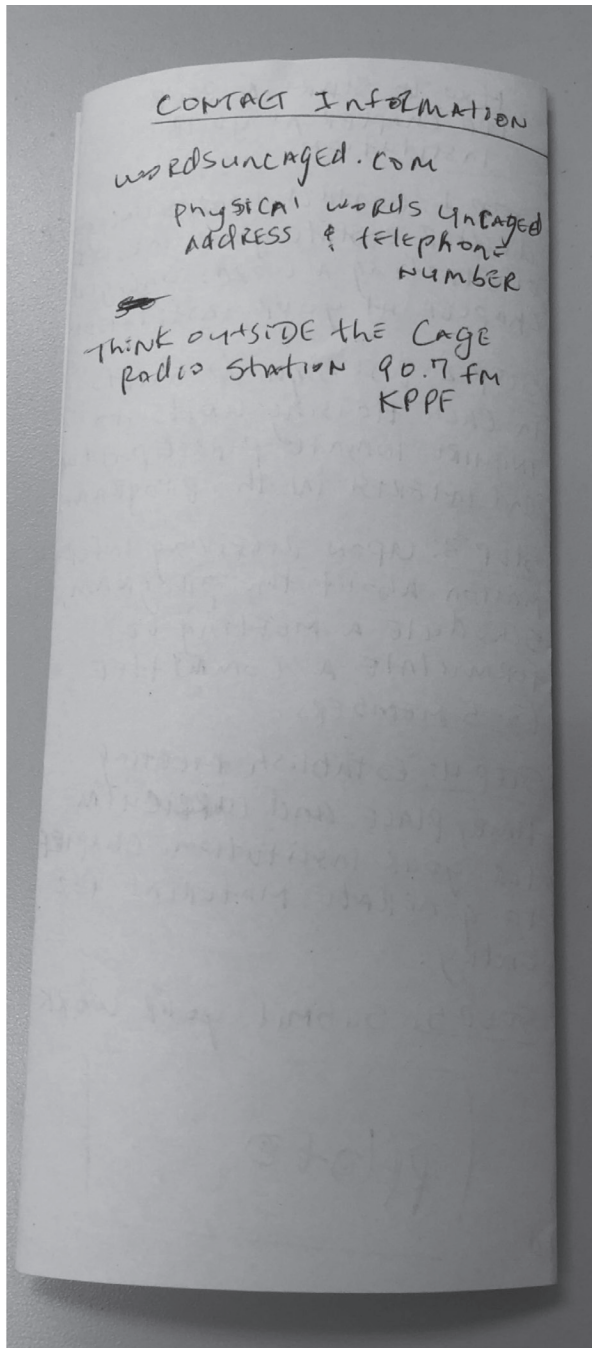


Figure 2-2

BASIC INFORMATION

WORDS UNCLAYED is a platform to which men and women who are incarcerated to have their voices, ideas, art, emotions and feelings heard.

OFTEN TIMES INMATES VOICES ARE SILENT AND SELDOM DO THEY HAVE AN OUTLET TO COMMUNICATE AND CONVEY THEIR TRANSFORMATIONS, REHABILITATION AND IMMENSE DESIRE TO MAKE AMENDS TO SOCIETY

WORDS UNCLAYED AIMS TO SHARE THE VOICES OF THE INCARCERATED BY OFFERING AN AVENUE TO SHARE ART WORK, POEMS, PAPERS, NARRATIVES, REFLECTIONS, AND OPINIONS WITH THE WORLD IN THE FORM OF PUBLISHED BOOKS, JOURNAL ENTRIES, SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS AND LIVE RADIO CONVERSATIONS.

WE WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND AN INVITE TO ALL INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS TO SHARE THEIR JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCE WITH EACH OTHER AS WELL AS THE WORLD.

HOW TO START A PEER LEAD CHAPTER AT YOUR INSTITUTION

STEP 1: CONTACT WORDS UNCLAYED DIRECTOR & STATE YOUR INTEREST OF STARTING A WORDS UNCLAYED CHAPTER AT YOUR INSTITUTION

STEP 2: POST SIGN-UP SHEETS IN EACH HOUSING UNITS TO INQUIRE INMATE PARTICIPATION AND INTEREST IN THE PROGRAM.

STEP 3: UPON RECEIVING INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM, SCHEDULE A MEETING TO FORMULATE A COMMITTEE (3-5 MEMBERS).

STEP 4: ESTABLISH MEETING TIME, PLACE AND CURRICULUM FOR YOUR INSTITUTION CHAPTER TO GENERATE MATERIAL FOR ENTRY.

STEP 5: SUBMIT YOUR WORK

PHOTO

Figure 2-3

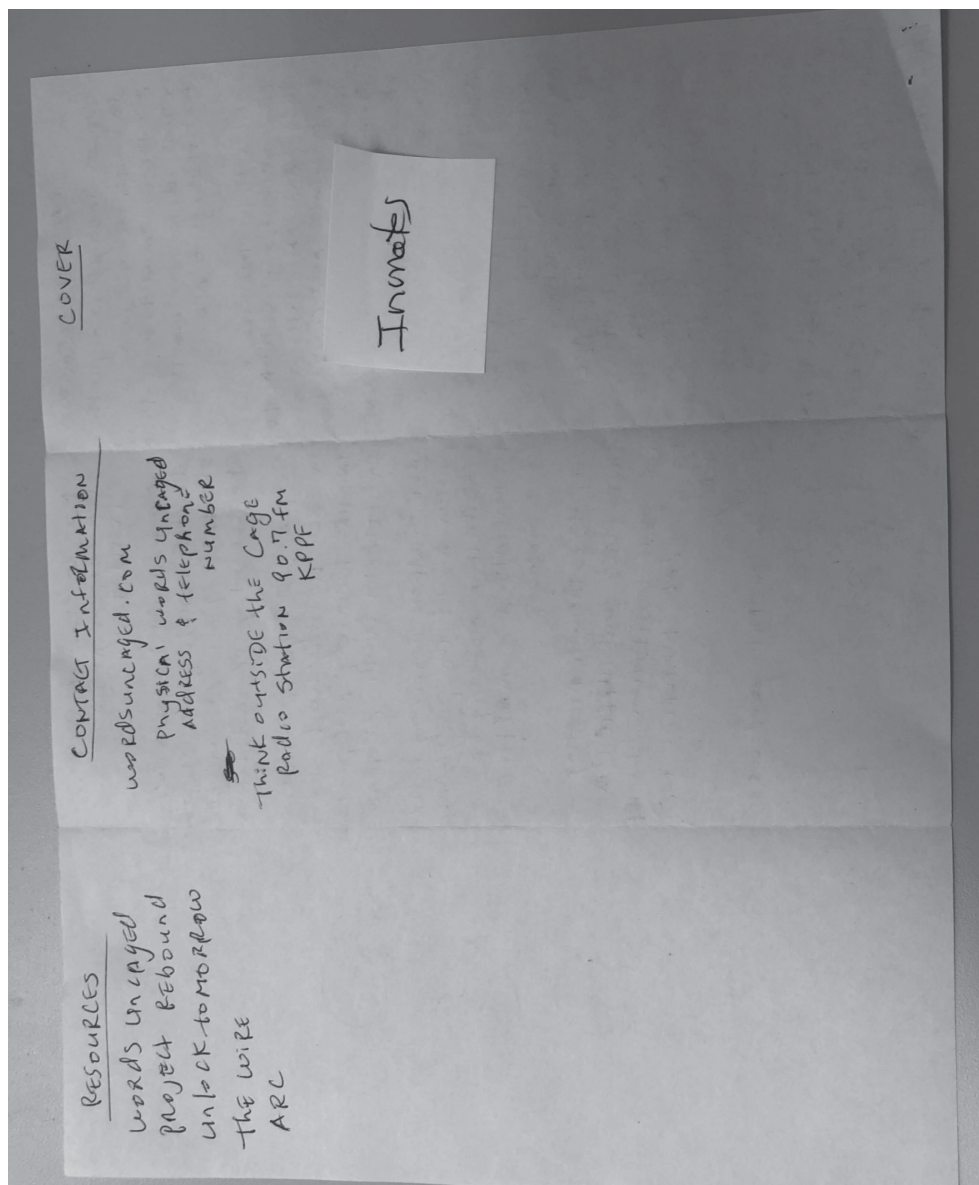


Figure 2-4

UNCAGED

CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON,
LANCASTER

www.wordsuncaged.com
wordsuncaged@gmail.com
 ATTN: Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy
 5151 State University Dr., E&T A636
 Los Angeles, CA 90032

START YOUR UNCAGED CHAPTER TODAY

Not Inmates—
Incarcerated Writers.

Do You Want to...

- Reclaim your individual voice.
- Have an honest conversation with other incarcerated writers and people outside the prison walls
- Get your work published in a journal
- Create positive social change through your narrative.

"I am able to write aspects of my life freely without judgment, where I can express my feelings, troubles, issues, and challenges. WordsUncaged gives me that platform to speak and tell my story." -- Joseph W.



Lorenzo Flores
LWOP. Served 22 years.

UNCAGED

CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON,
LANCASTER

www.wordsuncaged.com
wordsuncaged@gmail.com
 ATTN: Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy
 5151 State University Dr., E&T A636
 Los Angeles, CA 90032

START YOUR UNCAGED CHAPTER TODAY

Not Inmates—
Incarcerated Writers.

Other Resources

- Unlock Tomorrow
- Think Outside the Cage
- Radio Show on KPPE, 90.7FM
- ARC (Antirecivism Coalition)
- Project Rebound



Oil on Canvas, Christian Branscomb,
LWOP. Served 23 years.

James Joseph Cain
L.A.M.O.P. Prisoner
24-Years Young
C.S.I.C.L.A. Undergrad



In the oppressed and to fight
the suffer with them and fight
at their side (Frederic).

Postcard by James Cain, LWOP.

Figure 3-1

HOW WE REWRITE LIVES IN PRISONS

SHARING YOUR VOICE

Often times incarcerated voices are stifled and seldom do they have an outlet to communicate or convey their transformations, rehabilitation, and immense desire to make amends to society. We would like to extend an invitation to all offenders to share their journeys and experiences with each other as well as the world.



UNCAGING YOUR VOICE

WordsUncaged aims to share the voices of the incarcerated by offering an alternate avenue to share art work, poems, papers, narratives, reflections, and opinions with the world in the form of published books, journal entries, social media posts, and live radio conversations.

WHAT IS WORDS UNCAGED?

- WU is a platform to which incarcerated men and women voice their ideas, art, and emotions through their stories.
- Opportunity to build and form a strong community
- Therapeutic rehabilitation
- Entering a dialogue with the outside world—joining and creating the conversation.

*"His words a sweet milk, a silky
black ink, unheard, unseen, will
ooze from the pen onto a sheet of
paper that will sag,*

*unable to hold his voice
within its thin blue lines."*

(Craig and Romeo, Human 9). LWOP



HOW TO START A PEER-LED CHAPTER AT YOUR INSTITUTION

Step 1:

Contact WordsUncaged director, state your interest of starting another WordsUncaged chapter at your institution

Step 2:

Post sign-up sheets in each housing unit to inquire for incarcerated participation and interest in the program

Step 3:

Upon receiving the information about the program, schedule a meeting to formulate a committee for your chapter of WordsUncaged.

Step 4:

Establish a meeting time, place and curriculum for your institution's chapter to generate material for entry.

Step 5:

Submit your work to WU for publishing in our journals and online.

□

WORDS UNCAGED

Figure 3-2

Kathryn Perry is an Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Los Angeles. She primarily teaches composition theory and pedagogy, and is continually seeking opportunities to use storytelling to facilitate serendipitous yet sustainable community-engaged literacy. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Composition Theory*, *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, and *WAC Clearinghouse's Perspectives on Writing* series. She is currently conducting a study of graduate student writers' experiences with imposter syndrome.

Bidhan Chandra Roy is an Associate Professor of English Literature at California State University, Los Angeles. Bidhan has published articles and book chapters on Hanif Kureishi, Muslim identity and the novel, literary representations of South Asian ethnicity, Buddhism and literature, Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, as well as the travel writing of V.S. Naipaul. His recently published monograph is entitled, *A Passage To Globalism: Globalization and the Negotiation of Identities in South Asian Diasporic Fiction in Britain*. He is the founder of *WordsUncaged*, an organization with headquarters in downtown Los Angeles that provides a platform for incarcerated artists and writers to engage with the public, through book publishing, art exhibits and digital media. Bidhan is also currently the faculty director of the first in-prison degree program at Los Angeles County Prison, Lancaster, and researches new pedagogical approaches to teaching in prison.

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