

# Reflections

A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric

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Cover Art: The cover art is a remix of visual and written work produced behind bars. Visual artist Buju is a participant in the Florida-based Exchange 4 Change program. Brandee Sue is an alumna of the SpeakOut! Writing Workshop in northern Colorado and author of the “Why I Write” poem excerpted on the cover. Our collage artist Mary Ellen Sanger has worked in literacy projects for the underserved for 15 years. Her art adapting work from confined populations appears on covers from the past several years of SpeakOut! publications, and she is the author of *Blackbirds in the Pomegranate Tree: Stories for Ixcotel State Prison* (2013).

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*Reflections*, a peer reviewed journal, provides a forum for scholarship on public rhetoric, civic writing, service learning, and community literacy. Originally founded as a venue for teachers, researchers, students, and community partners to share research and discuss the theoretical, political and ethical implications of community-based writing and writing instruction, *Reflections* publishes a lively collection of scholarship on public rhetoric and civic writing, occasional essays and stories both from and about community writing and literacy projects, interviews with leading workers in the field, and reviews of current scholarship touching on these issues and topics.

We welcome materials that emerge from research; showcase community based and/or student writing; investigate and represent literacy practices in diverse community settings; discuss theoretical, political and ethical implications of community-based rhetorical practices; or explore connections among public rhetoric, civic engagement, service learning, and current scholarship in composition studies and related fields.



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# Guest Editors’ Introduction: Reflections special issue on Prison Writing, Literacies and Communities

Wendy Hinshaw  
& Tobi Jacobi

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*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.





# **Theorizing Prison Writing**



# My Work

**Chavelo Borden**

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To explain my task is to know any vision,  
My task has come with much pain &  
suffering,  
Yet & still I progress onward in my hopes,  
It's hard to explain,  
Knowing that for my work my only reward  
is pain,  
A steel blade thrust through my heart.  
To quit,  
Is to accept the agony of defeat of the  
heartless,  
Because of my work,  
My pen consists of a thousand unleashed  
emotions.  
Mixtures of grief and anger begging to be  
released,  
Yet I remain curiously calm,  
As if a wilderness undisturbed by man,  
Peace is what I seek in this land of injustice,  
This land for which my pen is my dad,  
While a piece of paper has become my  
mother,  
Because of my work,  
I starve as I reach for them,

Refusing to partake of the emergency rations,  
Rations prepared by unknown hands,  
No love involved,  
Only evil intent,  
For me....  
To die is to be relieved of a daily life in loneliness,  
So I write in order to look back,  
Even if only to see....  
The state of my life,  
Yet & still I am humbled,  
But how deep is my anguish?  
Seeking friends in the midst of my enemies,  
While snakes declare their love for a brother,  
Only with the plans to consume me & my work,  
Because of my work,  
I have felt true hatred,  
Only to eat the bread of truth,  
That in my work I am lonely,  
Without a companion to turn to,  
Not even you....

# More than Transformative: A New View of Prison Writing Narratives

**Larry Barrett,  
Pablo Mendoza,  
Logan Middleton,  
Mario Rubio,  
& Thomas Stromblad,**  
*University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign*

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*Common in higher education in prison (HEP) and writing studies research is the idea that writing and education are transformative for incarcerated populations. While we believe that both can be powerful tools for reflection and social change among people on the inside, the prevalence of such transformation narratives can contribute to stereotypical depictions or understandings of incarcerated people and their literacy practices.*

*Drawing upon our experiences with the Education Justice Project (EJP), a college-in-prison program, this article argues for expanded recognition and study of literacy practices, genres, and prison education beyond those typically discussed in HEP and writing studies scholarship. In doing so, we draw on the work of Martinez (2017) to present four personal scenes of writing and education as counterstories that intervene in master narratives about how incarcerated students are transformed by literacy. This approach not only grounds our work in methodology that values the lived and experiential knowledge of marginalized people but also enables us to push back against stock stories of prison writing that might inadvertently stereotype incarcerated students. Through telling our stories in this article, we call on academics to join us in composing different stories about incarcerated students that honor the complexities of our multiple identities and literacy practices.*

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As college-in-prison initiatives continue to gain prominence in the landscape of American higher education, so too does the role of writing in these programs. It makes sense, then, that prison writing and literacies are often objects of analysis in scholarship emerging from higher education in prison (HEP) and writing studies. Especially common in literature from these fields is the notion that writing can serve as a powerful tool for writers behind bars: a means for reflection and transformation (Meiners 2007; Appleman 2013), public engagement (Jacobi 2018), and social change (Lewen 2014). Taken together, such narratives stand to alter stereotypes of people who are incarcerated (Jacobi 2011, 44) and serve to “affirm [their] humanity and inherent dignity” (Reynolds 2014, 98).

We have no doubt that education and writing can be transformative for incarcerated populations. And we also believe they can play a role in enabling social change with regard to oppressive institutions. But these stories are not the only stories that people on the inside have to tell about writing.

In this article, we push at the boundaries of these narratives about writing in prison contexts. As students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one nonincarcerated graduate student and four incarcerated undergraduates, we collaboratively offer accounts that speak to a broader range of prison writing and literacy practices than those typically discussed in writing studies and HEP work. Drawing upon our experiences with the Education Justice Project (EJP), a college-in-prison program, we argue for the expanded recognition and study of such writing practices, genres, and education in these bodies of research. In doing so, we complicate stock ideas about what writing and literacy practices look like in carceral settings and add to existing dialogue about what work they can do for those on the inside.

First, we survey writing studies and HEP scholarship to pinpoint those genres, topics, and predominant narratives of literacy, writing, and learning that permeate this literature. Afterward, four EJP students—Thomas, Mario, Pablo, and Larry—share four scenes of writing. These narratives trouble trends in scholarship that overwhelmingly present writers who are incarcerated as bound

up with discourses of transformation and social change. Thomas considers writing into a new genre—a book review—while Mario addresses copyediting in the context of *The Amplifier*, EJP’s student newsletter. Next, Pablo comments on how traditional systems of schooling fail to take into account the relationships between writing, language, and education and what implications these absences have for teaching and learning in prison. And finally, Larry speaks to the need for multimodal writing in carceral contexts—especially for reentry purposes. Logan did not author a narrative for this collaboration because we wanted to prioritize the experiences of EJP students and what they have to say about writing and education. Due in part to our lack of access to outside materials, Logan worked to craft this article’s introduction, literature review, and conclusion with multiple rounds of feedback from the rest of us. We mention this because, per Castro and Gould (2018), we want to be transparent about the academic labor we performed and to explain how we enacted the ethics of co-writing as inside and outside students (3).

As such, Thomas, Mario, Pablo, and Larry’s scenes stand alone as individual authors’ experiences with writing. Read collectively, they illuminate the interwoven identities, textscapes, and literacies that EJP students produce and participate in. In doing this work, we shine a light on undertheorized labor as well as literacy practices within colleges-in-prison. We see these spaces as dynamic settings where individuals are never only reading, writing, or speaking but also always thinking, feeling, and making meaning for a wide range of purposes—educational or otherwise.

Finally, we want to note that EJP is a multifaceted organization that operates in accordance with the University of Illinois’s College of Education. Spanning across Danville Correctional Center (DCC) as well as outside communities in both Champaign-Urbana and Chicago, EJP “demonstrates the positive impacts of higher education upon incarcerated people, their families, the neighborhoods from which they come, the host institution, and society as a whole” (Education Justice Project 2019). Students must complete 60 credit hours of lower-division coursework before enrolling in EJP courses; these upper-level classes cross subject matter as varied as machine learning, critical race theory, and the history of the book. In addition, EJP offers

extracurricular programming at DCC, including math workshops, a mindfulness group, and Language Partners—a program in which EJP students provide English language instruction to emergent bilingual people.

## **CHARTING THE GENRES AND NARRATIVES OF PRISON WRITING**

This literature review surveys how writing and literacy are framed in HEP and writing studies scholarship. It's necessary to examine work from both fields because they comprehensively show how scholars represent the connections between literate activity and education at large. Working from this literature allows us to take stock of those narratives about prison writing that circulate in these fields, challenge and differentiate our stories from this work, and add our voices to such conversations.

Research from both disciplines suggests that scholars largely position autobiography, life writing, and creative writing as focal points of prison literacies. Whether through literacy narratives (Berry 2018), autoethnographic work (Carter 2008), or autobiographical writing (Reynolds 2014), incarcerated people are frequently framed as writing to tell stories about their lives—to reflect upon and find agency in them. For instance, in detailing her experiences teaching a pre-college literacy course at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Biscoglio (2005) explains how she instructed students to write about a relationship with either a parent or guardian (25). In addition, writing studies scholars present poetry and fiction as aiding workshop participants in developing creativity, voice, and storytelling (Jacobi 2004; 2012; Alessi and Jacobi 2014; Reynolds 2014). This approach to teaching on the inside is most centered in writing studies through Jacobi's work with SpeakOut!, a writing workshops series. While Evans (2018), an incarcerated student, speaks to his composing experiences in writing code (5), reading responses (5), and professional genres (10) in Common Good Atlanta's college-in-prison program, many other literacy initiatives primarily discuss creative and life writing genres (Coogan 2014; Roy 2018) as a means of fostering self-reflection.

Just as crucial to identifying prevalent genres and approaches to writing in HEP and writing studies research is recognizing predominant narratives about incarcerated students in this scholarship. These



texts overridingly promote ideas of how prison writing, literacies, and education enable individual and social transformation. Within this work, college-in-prison is often presented as a conduit to future material success. Maher (2015) describes how Bedford Hills students find careers after release; they “[make] it on the outside as a result of the college degrees they earned while in prison” (87). Similarly, Lagemann (2015) narrates the growth of “an impulsive and often violent young man” who, after completing his undergraduate education through the Bard Prison Initiative, became “a mature, successful, tax-paying businessman” (415). In addition, Heppard (2019) discusses the possibilities for HEP to change individuals (4) while Scott (2018) and Karpowtiz (2017) echo this sentiment in observing that one of HEP’s primary purposes is to transform incarcerated people and their futures. Even students writing from the inside describe how HEP plays a critical role in “transform[ing] . . . lives” (Evans 2018, 3) and becoming “newer, better version[s] of [their] former [selves]” (Davis 2018, 9). Select articles in writing studies literature analogously present literacy as a mechanism of this individual growth and self-discovery. What Jacobi (2018) describes as SpeakOut’s approach to “literacy as an active and dynamic tool for self-expression, reflection, communication, and social change” (110) is a thread that’s woven throughout other accounts of prison writing. Berry (2018) observes, for example, how literacy narratives “chronicle a process of becoming” (30) in which “literacy [is] fused with a sense of rebirth and uplift” (30). Others chart the empowering benefits of such programming as helping writers make sense of their pasts (Jacobi 2010, 76) and resist dehumanization (Reynolds 2014, 98). On a more systemic level, scholars also describe participants’ writing and education as a means of social transformation (Lewen 2014, 353). These efforts can challenge dominant institutions (Lewen 2014, 360) and advance social justice causes (Jacobi 2010, 76; Reynolds 2014, 114).

Although HEP and writing studies touch upon the academic literacies of incarcerated students, we seek to broaden the scope of those genres, processes, and aspects of writing discussed in the literature. Even as writing studies takes a capacious view of writing, there is, for instance, little sustained focus on revision and editing when it comes to the discussion of prison literacies. Also important is that, aside from Cavallaro et al. (2016), the multimodal dimensions of writing

are even less discussed in prison contexts. We view these areas of inquiry as starting points from which we can build our own work. Below, Thomas and Mario narrate their experiences with revision and copyediting, demonstrating how incarcerated writers navigate process. Larry's work, conversely, makes a case for the necessity of multimodal writing instruction on the inside. In speaking to these considerations, we expand conversations about how incarcerated people engage in academic writing, which is rarely discussed from inside perspectives.

As this literature review suggests, writing and education can be life-changing for incarcerated individuals. Yet it's just as imperative to provide alternatives to these master narratives about prison literacies, which we complicate below. For some in prison, education doesn't facilitate critical consciousness or material success after release. In his section, Mario reflects on his work with *The Amplifier* to push back on tropes in these common stories. And as Pablo observes, we should consider the detrimental effects of schooling for incarcerated people just as much we theorize their educational experiences. Collectively, our narratives provide more varied understandings of how writing, literacy, and education matter for people in prison.

## **CARCERAL COUNTERSTORIES: A NOTE ON OUR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

While the literature above seldom or explicitly defines transformation for incarcerated people, it's clear from this work that this process marks dramatic change in individuals from one disposition to another. For us, however, transformation can be coopted by or deeply embedded in notions of rehabilitation, treatment, and control—all carceral logics (Castro and Gould 2018, 4). While often well-intentioned in educational contexts, such discussions are often taken up by the general public as metamorphoses of “prisoners” from “uneducated” to “educated,” “deviant” to “reformed,” and “criminal” to “citizen.” From our experiences in college-in-prison, we've found that these discourses of transformation can inadvertently result in saviorism, academic tourism, or outside people thinking that we're in need of redemption. Thus, we avoid engaging transformation here because we are not interested in participating in or enabling these stereotypical stories.

In the narratives that follow, we draw upon the work of Martinez (2017) in order to present each experience of writing as a counterstory. As a critical race theory method, counterstory serves as a means for “marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form ‘master narratives’” (Martinez 2017, 83). This approach grounds our stories in a framework that validates lived and experiential knowledge—especially that which is produced by people of color and those from underrepresented backgrounds (Martinez 2017, 69). We use counterstory as our methodological frame because each story that follows pushes back against dominant narratives about how incarcerated students are transformed by writing and education in prison. This method helps us create a foundation for communicating underrepresented ideas about prison literacies that speak to increased recognition of these practices in carceral space.

To be clear, we do not submit such writing to offer accounts of how college-in-prison helps people become “better” or “new.” Nor do we position our narratives as explicit efforts to change social institutions. Our ultimate goal is, instead, to shift academics and instructors’ perceptions of incarcerated populations from people who are changed by education to complex individuals who are thinking about writing just like others on the inside and outside. This intended outcome, we believe, is not the same as transformation. And so, we use counterstory to generate “[n]arratives counter to [those] majoritarian or stock stories” (Martinez 2017, 81) to avoid flattening the experiences of and harming people in prison.

## **THOMAS’S NARRATIVE (BOOK REVIEW)**

Writing in a new form has never come easy for me. But when a workshop on writing a book review came around, I jumped at the opportunity. Unfortunately, I ended up missing the first of the two sessions. I kept sending in requests to attend the workshop, and fortunately I made it on the final day. The only caveat was that I needed to write a 1,000-word review in one day. Little did I realize that it’d be published in *The Amplifier*, for which I had just become a staff writer. In hindsight, I may have been a little too sure of myself. I heard the words come out of my mouth: “Sure, I’ll write a book review.” I thought, *This’ll be easy. It’ll be a summary and my opinion about the piece.* Later that day, though, I found myself pondering, *How*

*do I write this? Who am I to judge some author's hard work and artistic expression? What's the best way to get the readers' attention? That is, if they should even read the book at all. What if I do this book more harm than good?* But the one-day deadline turned out to be a blessing. I dove in and put my concerns on the backburner. My last thought before starting was, *Here goes nothing...* After eight hours and three cups of coffee, the first draft was done.

As I began to proofread my work, I realized it read like a summary. *Should it? Who can I ask what I did wrong, if anything, and how can I fix it?* Luckily for me, a volunteer, Logan, was around. I asked him for help. My luck continued as he gave me great ideas on how to improve my review. I began to notice my mistakes. *Oh, that's where I messed up. And there. Let me fix these issues and get an opinion on the corrections I made.* I gave a copy of my review to another outside EJP volunteer I'd just met, and it came back with more corrections than I anticipated. I lost all direction at that point. I struggled with how to address these concerns, but I ended up working on what I thought were the structural issues and sent it to the editor of *The Amplifier*. He thought I included too much detail and that it read more like a summary than a book review. Returning to my work for another draft the next day, I thought to myself, *They say the third time is the charm; one more try. I'm just going to have to do my best and let the cards fall where they may. Let me go back and reread some of the book reviews I've read in the past and see if that'll help me. Hmm, most of them read as a summary. Well, this certainly doesn't clarify a direction for me. There doesn't seem to be a real set standard for this genre. I'll have to do what I feel works best.*

I initially took this workshop to expand my horizons! I pondered, *Why am I stressing about this? This is what I signed up for. Let me take in all the advice I get, use what I am capable of, and learn from the experience.*

I dove into the corrections head-first. My mind raced. *Done. First book review ever. I hope someone likes it as much as I liked the book I wrote about. I wonder, does writing these reviews get easier? Will I get better, and by whose standards do I judge my work? Artistically, maybe the only person's standards that matter are mine. Realistically, it's the reader's opinion that matters. But for the reader to even have a chance to read it, it's the editor's standards that must be met.*

Looking back, I've come to realize that the ultimate judge of an author's work is himself, and we are much more critical of our own accomplishments than others. The decision of who to satisfy must be a compromise. We must be true to ourselves, and yet, we must be sensitive to the concerns of others, especially if we actually want to share our work with the world.

While this book review has created a lot of questions for me, it's taught me that it is difficult to try new things, and yet those tasks can be very rewarding. The two greatest lessons that I've learned from this endeavor are that I needed to be more descriptive in my writing, giving the audience more information to flesh out and bring to life my arguments. Second, I made too many assumptions on what the audience knows. It is too easy to forget that the audience may not know information that the author may have taken for granted. Further, this genre is different than any school assignment, and it's afforded me the opportunity to explore a form of writing that I've never attempted before, better preparing me for future projects.

Since my completion of the book review, I have been able to apply lessons learned to my fiction writing, school papers, and conference papers. I learned that all forms of writing are enhanced by good storytelling. Through this experience, I've become more proficient at telling stories—fleshing them out and bringing them to life so the reader doesn't just feel they're reading stories but are actively engaged in the scenes being described. This has enhanced my EJP papers and other academic writing. Being able to relate all of the pertinent information to readers has elevated my capabilities to argue my points and to take them along a path that is fluid and easy to follow, making me a better writer one word at a time.

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We want to show that just because we're incarcerated doesn't mean that we can only participate in and talk about a select few categories of writing. The next author, Mario, will show that not only can we be proficient in writing itself but in copyediting too.

## MARIO'S NARRATIVE (COPYEDITING)

*The Amplifier* is a student-run newsletter that's been around since 2016. The material that we produce deals primarily with authors writing what they know—mainly stories of transformation in parts of their lives. We also encourage authors to write book reviews, puzzles, summaries of the classes they're in, and poems. That said, we strive to produce material that reflects some of the best writing that our fellow EJP students have to offer. We circulate *The Amplifier* to most of the DCC populace; we print a full issue bi-monthly and a calendar with small articles in the months that we don't run full issues.

As copyeditor of *The Amplifier*, it's my job to ensure that the writing we receive is in pristine condition. I am tasked with simple line editing (spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors), and I also undertake the more challenging task of sifting through drafts to get to the final product. In a way, I try to get to what the writer is saying in the piece. Style, voice, grammar, syntax; these are just some of the terms that I constantly run into. Each one requires a certain amount of knowledge to produce an article that is worthy of our prestigious paper. We like to let writers produce whatever they want, but we often have to resort to heavy editing due to limitations of the authors' writing abilities.

As I read first drafts that are submitted by EJP students, all I can think is, *What the hell is going on here?* These articles are riddled with run-on sentences and most go on tangents that aren't even related to the starting topics in the first place. We also often receive "transformation articles" in which authors write about recurring themes of making mistakes, learning from said mistakes, and then redeeming themselves through an approved method of redemption. They're not bad, but we get so many of them that we tire of working with prospective writers who start their work with the dreaded "I've learned from my mistakes." Beyond this topic, there are hidden jewels in there, which many incarcerated individuals can relate to—overcoming our insufficient knowledge. I bring this up to writers, tell them to focus on those ideas and to get rid of the excess. They typically respond with arguments I've grown tired of hearing—"You're taking my voice away." This is another problem

that I constantly run into. I, in turn, respond by telling them, “I’m not blocking or stealing your voice; I am simply refining it.” The only reason that I have the knowledge to edit other peoples’ work is through years of reading and by becoming familiar with the rules that govern the written language. Through reading investigative magazine articles, I’ve learned different ways to cite authors’ work. Through reading countless (non) fiction books, I’ve learned different ways that authors present ideas when they write stories.

I try to tell writers that all papers have problems. I say, “Even some of the teachers and volunteers have had their articles rearranged or edited.” What I leave out are the differences in mistakes. Often, teachers or volunteers’ articles have minor grammar or punctuation issues while EJP students’ articles have problems that often require two to three rounds of editing. It’s these articles that give me the most trouble due to the problem of having to explain every little change. Don’t get me wrong; I am more than happy sharing my knowledge. But it saddens me that these authors never have opportunities to learn what it takes to produce passable papers.

I hope that by imparting some of my copyediting knowledge, authors will learn the importance of this useful skill. Copyediting allows writers to think ahead and self-edit their own work so it can stay in line with what they’re saying—their voice. When writers know the rules of writing, they learn when it’s acceptable to break them. “Why would you want to break the rules?” they may ask. Maybe your writing style doesn’t mesh well with the particular genre you’re writing in. So you break the rules to reinvigorate your voice, so *who you are* comes through the writing, and your style can make the impact you want it to make.

By becoming an autodidactic, I taught myself some of the more difficult terms associated with the editing process. Autodidact is not a word that most people will hear in their lives. It is an all-too familiar term to those of us wishing to become educated but don’t have access to the right materials, can’t get into school, or are being taught incorrectly. We incarcerated individuals end up taking on the task of lighting that torch of knowledge ourselves. After years of fumbling in the dark with sticks and stones, we eventually learn what

it takes to light the torch—a beacon that will become the guiding light for our future.

Why do we need to go through so much just to produce something that people may or may not read in the end? Maybe it's due to some much-needed catharsis, or maybe we're just bored. My hope is, though, that someone on the outside will read these articles and realize that incarcerated people can be more than just *transformation* writers. When they do, I want what we produce to reflect who we can become as writers.

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We've spoken on some of the difficulties that we face with writing in prison. Pablo will now touch on some of the issues that outside schooling systems have created for us on the inside.

## **PABLO'S NARRATIVE (EDUCATION)**

My participation in EJP and Danville Community College in prison as a student, evaluator, ESL instructor, and a literacy / math tutor has uncovered serious flaws in my writing process. A typical response paper always seems to morph into an exercise of patience that ends up drastically crippling my academic morale. Recent attempts to shore up compositional deficiencies has led me to conduct a retrospective analysis on the reasoning for such struggles. I have concluded that my elementary education is at the root of the problem because it failed to introduce to me methods of self-expression.

Elementary school provided me with basic tools for comprehension and content regurgitation. I look to stray away from all that I've learned during those early years as I strive to establish a solid writing foundation. I am constantly haunted by mind maps and essay formats. None of the aforementioned has assisted me in composing a paper where I express my own ideas or create a workable understanding of subject matter. I am repeatedly choked off from my words as I drown in locutionary (what I say), illocutionary (what I intend to say), and perlocutionary dynamics (what's actually understood by my audience). As a result, I can't help but feel silenced.



My current experience as an ESL instructor for Language Partners has revealed some questionable results. As an instructor, I tend to ground myself in the type of rudimentary instruction I received. This type of instruction doesn't seem to produce much fruit. Students always struggle with writing assignments when limited to the traditional grammar exercises we teach. In contrast, when presented with free-write or journal exercises, they usually have a more accurate and expressive handle on the English language—one they lack in controlled writing or grammar exercises. The students I work with repeatedly challenge my position as an instructor, and they write deeply amusing stories filled with emotion and drama that always leave me wanting more. More often than not, I'm the one who benefits from their instruction.

I have learned through academic study that traditional writing instruction stifles students' cognitive development. Academics would be better served if they were allowed to express themselves in a manner that's more in tune with the way they learn. To me, assessment tools that provide students with opportunities to utilize newly acquired knowledge are more effective. Presenting students with chances to challenge knowledge instead of purely being knowledge-holders can bring about a metamorphosis through which they can transform into knowledge-creators. I align closely with Freire (1970) in accepting all parties as knowledge-holders and knowledge-creators to create an environment of reciprocal learning.

A good portion of my audience will interpret my writing to be a dig at the carceral educational experience because they can't see past my incarceration. I want to explicitly state that this piece echoes the educational challenges of my academic peers. We come from varying walks of life yet regardless of age or race, we share a similar educational experience—the public school system.

Writing instructors, then, need to meet students where they're at and value their lived experiences. Instruction of any kind is multifaceted. It's a perfect picnic of language, writing, and education. My contribution to this publication is to challenge instructors to view their students as more than numbers—demographic, statistical, or otherwise—and see them as living, breathing individuals.

Pablo's scene concerns our past classroom experiences and calls for additional modes of personal expression. Our next colleague, Larry, addresses the importance of multimodal literacy for individuals reentering society.

## **LARRY'S NARRATIVE (MULTIMODALITY)**

Learning to become literate in this modern climate is complicated for anyone, but it is even more so for people who are incarcerated, cut off from a high-tech society that is converting to more multimodal forms of communication. To be literate in any of these forms of composition is to be able to navigate and negotiate any combination of these modes, "forms of communication that utilize material use of color, still and moving images, embodied performances, objects, textures, scents, nonlinear movement, sound" (Shipka 2006, 356) and any of the digital platforms. There is a void for some incarcerated individuals who are disenfranchised members of society that goes unfilled, limiting how they represent their identities, utilize their agency, and create messages to communicate their ideas effectively. Because media and communication are ever-changing—and the learning environments within prisons are not—a person who's been in for an extended time would have difficulty relating to this outside society. For example, the ability to mobilize people to stand up for a cause through the use of a tweet, podcast, or blog is lost upon inside populations that are not afforded opportunities to use their voices in such a manner. Instructors, then, need to change the pedagogy used in prisons to enhance the agency and voices of these people so that they can learn the tools to enact lasting change in their lives and in society.

Generally, literacy is a rarely discussed topic within populations that are incarcerated. While thoughts of what a person ought to know upon release are present within their minds, literacy is not often among the considerations. Literacy, however, is a part of peoples' daily lives. It's not only the way that we understand one another; it allows a survivor the ability to form a message using a particular mode of communication in order to speak out against oppressive behavior by a person that harmed them (e.g., the #MeToo movement).

Nevertheless, for people who are incarcerated, there is not only the need to learn the affordances and constraints of certain modes of composition or the consequences of using fast-developing trends of communication. People returning to society must also learn tools to think critically about composing and interpreting messages. Developing such understandings of multimodal communication would allow these people to function as “literate citizens in a world where communications crosses geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic borders” (Selfe 2009, 618).

There is also a need to allow the use of technology both in the classroom and in the daily lives of those who are incarcerated. Although contact with technology is something that I am afforded almost on a daily basis, this is not the current reality of most people in Illinois state prisons. Access to technology is important to become an active citizen of society, something that most people in positions of power don’t realize is critical to reintegrating into a modern society. For example, instructors in prisons can help individuals learn how to create concise messages that capture the entire essence of their ideas in creative ways, such as in tweets, mime or text forms, or even in essays written on ballet shoes (Shipka 2011, 3). This thinking outside of the box can enrich innovation and allow us to push against oppressive institutions within this nation.

The close examination of literacy skills of incarcerated people sheds new light on the neglected issue of incarcerated people’s reentry back into our communities. Through learning these skills, this unique group of people would gain the affordability of being able to navigate and negotiate different forms of communication. This would offer a better understanding into the meaning of messages, like Donald Trump’s tweets that use dog-whistle language, so that only a certain few will understand how he’s using his platform to show support for the alt-right. Acquiring these skills can allow these women and men on the inside to speak out against injustices in their lives in an effective way that could reach lots of people. In addition, this pedagogy would give this group additional ways to represent and communicate their ideas effectively to the communities in which they live. Learning new or refining multiple forms of communication

is more than just the ability to communicate effectively; it is a way to push back against unjust practices to form a more perfect world.

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT'S NEXT?**

Per Martinez (2017), counterstory serves as “a method of telling stories by people whose experiences are not often told” (70). We don’t use this approach solely to say that the stories of incarcerated people are often silenced. We also leverage counterstory to amplify stories of incarcerated students that address how we write and revise, teach and learn across multiple spaces in college-in-prison environments—the likes of which are often untold in HEP and writing studies literature. We are not just “prison writers.” We are researchers, teachers, facilitators, editors, and thinkers. These aspects of writing, literacy, and education can spark learning just as much as those stories of life writing and transformation.

Thus, we use our platform to call on academics to join us in writing different stories about incarcerated students, ones that don’t center transformation. Start by working with us more to theorize how we navigate genre, revision, copyediting, teaching, language, schooling, and multimodality. Ask us about how we design and conduct research from the inside with limited resources and materials. Consider our perspectives as instructors of language and literacy in prisons when crafting writing pedagogies that take up ideas of access. And grant us a seat at the table when it comes to writing the stories of our lives and learning. Doing so can honor the complexity of our identities, not solely as students or as incarcerated people but as scholars and human beings.

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# Bodily Instruments: Somatic Metaphor in Prison-Based Research

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*This analysis uses a critical race framework from African-American literary studies (Morrison 1993, McBride 2001) to locate discourses of whiteness circulating between the texts of prison-based scholar-practitioners and their imprisoned counterparts, considering how those rhetorical economies risk marginalizing prisoners in an already vexed space. Recognizing the role of affect and bodily ritual in shaping those economies, the analysis then turns to Jennifer LeMesurier's account of somatic metaphor (2014) as a storehouse of rhetorical knowledge, and what John Protevi describes as, "a personal political physiology [capable of shaping] institutional action" (Protevi 2009, xii) to explore how such bodied knowledge scales from the personal to the political. This revised sense of the continuum between affect, ritual, and the political might, in turn, provide prison-based scholar-practitioners with a new vocabulary for understanding our own subjectivities as they shape our carceral encounters, our activist impulses, and the scholarship that ensues, in a way that avoids retrenching discourses of whiteness, and painting prisoners as what Toni Morrison might call, "some suffering thing" (Morrison 1993, 3-4).*

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Prison. We've seen the movie, read harrowing tales about life on the inside, and dutifully studied our Sloop and Foucault; we recognize tropes of constraint, redemption, and suffering in the pop-cultural carceral landscape, even as we're caught in the gravitational pull of those appeals. Like many fellow teacher-scholars working in prisons, I too felt a seismic jolt as I moved from marquis, top-billing *prison* in the popular imagination to mundane, everyday prison, inhabited by those I would learn from, write with, and root for in the coming years, robed in dim, antiseptic light, punctuated by the clang of metal and the squeak of standard-issue sneakers on a cold floor, razor wire ever idling at the corners. Those memories mark affective experiences shaped by time spent in prisoner advocacy and dissertation research, amplified in gatherings with other prison-based rhet-comp and community literacy scholars sharing their own stories, mirrored in a body of scholarship rife with like descriptors of that singular space. Whether mobilized as metaphor or an account of the physical environment, the pervasiveness of such language suggests the primacy of affect in shaping broader practitioner discourse in prison contexts. If, as Brian Massumi (1995) suggests, "skin is faster than the word" (86), then it's worth thinking about how bodily intensities shape the rhetorical economies that animate our scholarship, sponsorships, and curation of prison-based writings for different audiences.

I focus on language not because I wish to dismiss fellow scholar-practitioners' experiences or amplify the already prominent teacher/savior narrative. Work in critical prison studies (Rodríguez 2002; 2010) and rhetorics of whiteness (Ryden and Marshall 2012) <sup>1</sup> caution us against recentering the white, liberal, antiracist scholarly narrative at the expense of stories by prisoners themselves, on their own terms; that concern is echoed in service-learning education research (Mitchell et al 2012) and prison-based community literacy scholarship<sup>2</sup>, which acknowledges prison education research's tendency to focus on teacher experience (Berry 2018a, 198; 2018b, 68), and recognizes the need to interrogate teacher/savior narratives (Jacobi and Stanford 2014, 3) as well as the deficiency model they promote (Reynolds 2014, 110). Yet, a close reading of that larger body of work, using critical race scholarship in literary studies (Morrison 1993; McBride 2001), reveals discursive patterns that nevertheless risk marginalizing prisoner voices, thereby undermining even the

most mindful scholarship and literacy sponsorship in an already vexed space.<sup>3</sup>

This paper aims, then, to help assess our language in new ways so that we might hold our scholarship more accountable to the rhetorical economies we employ when we write for different audiences. The first part is listening to African American literary criticism in order to recognize the discourses of whiteness circulating between scholar-practitioners' texts and their imprisoned counterparts. The second part is acknowledging the role of affect and bodily ritual in shaping those logics and the extent to which such bodied knowledge scales from the personal to the political; here I turn to Jennifer LeMesurier's (2014) account of somatic metaphor as a storehouse of rhetorical knowledge, and what John Protevi (2009) describes as, "a personal political physiology [capable of shaping] institutional action" (xii). This revised sense of the continuum between affect, ritual, and the political might, in turn, provide prison-based scholar-practitioners with a revised vocabulary for understanding our own subjectivities as they shape our carceral encounters, our activist impulses, and the scholarship that ensues, in a way that avoids retrenching discourses of whiteness and painting prisoners as what Toni Morrison (1993) might call, "some suffering thing" (3-4).

### **(ENSLAVED) BLACKNESS, KNOWING, ABOLITION**

The juxtaposition of white citizen-subject and black slave has pervaded both literary and expository writing since the inception of the American project; As Toni Morrison (1993) observes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the American Literary Imagination*, writers have employed the figure of the black/enslaved body as a means of exploring white subjectivity from Poe's Gothic romance (31-32, 83) to Stein's use of Malanctha to experiment with character (14)<sup>4</sup>. Dwight McBride's (2001) *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* situates that discursive tradition in the context of abolitionism, where the troping of enslaved bodies by abolitionists and slave testimonies alike reinscribed the whiteness of Enlightenment subjectivity. And though literary criticism has elsewhere noted this kind of *chiaroscuro* as a stylistic feature of Gothic (Riquelme 2000, 610) and Victorian texts (Ridenhour 2012) untethered to race, Morrison's and McBride's findings reflect a broader Enlightenment

project of defining knowledge in the face of an (enslaved) Other: white subjectivity opposed to a conflation of darkness and the beyond, and consciousness as a move from darkness to light. Here, then, we see the origins of a rhetorical economy in which the enslaved (black) Other represents both a frontier and the metaphorical darkness that precedes formation of the citizen-subject; in so doing, Morrison and McBride provide a framework for recognizing the extent to which contemporary prison literacy scholarship draws on a longstanding rhetorical tradition reliant on a troping of darkness and light that Morrison (1993) terms, “romancing the shadow” (32-58). And although U.S. prisons’ racial and ethnic diversity resists one-to-one correspondence with the distinctly dyadic racial logics of American slavery,<sup>5</sup> the disproportionality of black prisoners—incarcerated at 5.1 times the rate of whites (Nellis 2010, 4), owing to a confluence of racial attitudes, court decisions, and labor policies dating from slavery<sup>6</sup>—suggests that the imprint of both slavery and abolitionism continues to shape the prison *topos*.

McBride’s project helps explain the circulation and durability of white discourse in prison literacy contexts, but also how those tropes are taken up by prisoners themselves, forming an ongoing circuit of authentication between sponsor and recipient that, at best, renders imprisoned writers complicit in a discursive economy that perpetuates the institution, and, at worst, undermines the logic of writing as conduit for agency. This difficulty bears out what Joy James (2003) warns about the dual nature of prisoner narratives: “(Neo) Slave narratives emerge from the combative discourse of the captive as well as the controlling discourse of the ‘master’ state” (xxi-xxii).<sup>7</sup>

Prison-based community literacy scholar-practitioners recognize the axiological difficulty James describes, having written extensively on the ethical, social, and political implications of their sponsorship, including complicity (Hartnett et al 2011; Jacobi 2011; Sutcliffe 2015) with the institutional discourses that privilege notions of individual transformation (Rogers et al 2017); the practical necessity of ideological compromise (Curry and Jacobi 2017, 6, 9); and the extent to which instruction in that dominant-discursive context reduces likelihood of political or social change (Sutcliffe 2015, 18, 30)—even with the most progressive of intentions (Reynolds 2014,

101).<sup>8</sup> As if to reiterate Rodríguez's (2010) critique of the university as a partner in the American carceral regime (9), Laura Rogers calls attention to how professional identity has come to depend on this dynamic (Rogers et al 2017, 82).

At the same time, sponsors' complicity—whether strategic or unintentional—orbits within a larger prison *topos*, wherein prisoners' writings are already overdetermined. Curry and Jacobi (2017), for example, observe the difficulty women prisoners themselves have in interrupting those representations and the “pressure to produce and publish certain forms of prison writing”<sup>9</sup>—an issue they propose resolving through joint sponsorship (11).<sup>10</sup> These pressures articulate prison-based literacy scholarship's place between a rhetorical rock and a hard place: how to simultaneously establish genre credibility in dominant-discursive spaces—and galvanize various publics to action, while maintaining an ethics of representation that enables imprisoned writers to speak on their terms? Even as scholar-practitioners maintain a sober disposition regarding the im/possibilities of literacy sponsorship in carceral space, there remains a tacit desire for prison literacy to move beyond the therapeutic to a more tangible political or social emancipation that might culminate in the project of prison abolition.

Jacobi (2011), for example, posits teaching counternarrative as not only a conduit for “more ardent activism,” but one bound specifically to abolition (41), a disposition shared by Hartnett et al (2011) in their call for pedagogies of resistance toward empowered citizenship (332-333). Cory Holding reiterates prison literacy programming's abolitionist potential as a rearticulation of relationships (Rogers et al 2017, 83), while Sutcliffe (2015) aligns his queered pedagogy with Angela Davis's abolition project towards “a shared vision of lasting alternatives to detention and surveillance” (20). Now, these scholar-practitioners do proceed cautiously onto abolitionist terrain; Jacobi clarifies that, in *SpeakOut!*, only some participants reflect on power relations, others being motivated by emotional release and boredom (2011, 45-6),<sup>11</sup> and that “[t]he introduction of potentially revolutionary writings and ideas, critical literacy practices, and methods for promoting alternatives to socially constructed identity narratives of incarcerated writers must be navigated with care”

(2008, 80). So, too, do Hartnett et al (2011) argue for an abolitionist disposition that expands scholar-practitioners' conceptions of "what counts as political engagement" beyond narrowly radical definitions (333). Nevertheless, that a number of texts yoke prison literacy explicitly to the prison abolition project suggests that the discursive genealogy between nineteenth-century abolitionists and present-day prison literacy sponsor/scholars merits examination. Even as tropes like literacy as a move from darkness to light originate in affective encounters with the prison itself, the overdetermined nature of racial discourse in the American context demands that we recognize moments when our language inadvertently traffics in rhetorics that have historically served to valorize advocates over imprisoned/enslaved subjects.

The troping of darkness and light evokes a borderland between known and unknown, but also the rich network of conversations around borders, contact zones, and margins in rhet-comp more broadly.<sup>12</sup> So, too, is the prison, by virtue of its function as a site of forced displacement, necessarily a borderland—where communicative activity serves to situate, dislocate, and relocate interlocutors—as well as break down very real barriers of understanding and ability. The extent to which the repeated troping of the prison as a site of danger and invitation to knowledge, however, invites comparison to Morrison's (1993) "romancing the shadow" (32), wherein prisoners occupy stage dressing to sponsors, center-stage.<sup>13</sup>

A definitive publication in prison literacy scholarship, the 2004 special issue of *Reflections* offers three instances of prison-as-frontier, giving teacher-scholars and general readers alike a sense of bodily stakes in prison literacy, broadly conceived. Kerr's (2004) "Between Ivy and Razor Wire" invokes a perilous encounter with the beyond through synecdoche, following threat of bodily injury with an account of "teaching and learning in the long, dark and highly charged shadow of law and order ideology" (62)—a dramatization evoking the gothic villainy and haunted spaces Morrison describes. So, too, does Jacobi's (2008) "Slipping Pages" focus on the danger of razor wire, framing it as a frontier for social action, and those that conduct prison literacy work in terms that evoke heroism, transgression, and bodily peril:

To slip through the razor wire is to challenge the system. To slip through the razor wire is risky, whether you are trying to slip contraband in—or make it visible to the rest of the world. And to slip through, under, or around razor wire with language—written or verbal—I suggest, is the work of social justice and a growing number of scholars in composition and rhetoric who are motivated by such issues and the possibility of change (67).

This sense of frontier creates excitement exhorting the reader to not only continue, but be moved to action, presumably receptive to Coogan's (2006) call for public writing to perform social inquiry towards social change. Doing so makes rhetorical sense, given that SpeakOut! programming aims to cultivate learning opportunities for undergraduates, as well as encourage other literacy scholar-practitioners to "acknowledge the possibility" of such spaces. Yet, the passage's deliberate cultivation of suspense inadvertently positions scholar-practitioners as the primary agents of struggle.

That danger and suspense culminates in Pompa's (2004) "Disturbing Where We Are Comfortable" (24-34). Rather than cast the edition as an isolated rhetorical event, Pompa's piece affirms the rhetorical force of the prison-frontier figuration, having been republished in (Deans et al 2010) and cited by multiple venues aimed at community literacy audiences—a success that echoes the discursive circuitry McBride (2001) describes in his account of codes deployed by abolitionists and mirrored by slaves. Just as abolitionism demonstrated successive reliance on the black body to "conform to certain codes to be legible to its audience" (2), so does the proliferation of both Pompa's (2004) article and program design suggest the frontier trope as a powerful force in prison literacy's rhetorical economy. Yet, the piece's stylized depiction of prison and prisoners takes that figuration even further.

Pompa writes that Inside Out aims to "move [students] out of the safety that distance provides, and go there—in order to learn, to experience, to be disturbed, to *read the life itself*" (24, emphasis author's). Here, as with Jacobi's invitation to injury and contraband, the article leads readers on a perilous journey "behind the walls" to "disturb where we are comfortable" (24). The piece describes the prison as a site of fertile pedagogical terrain for students and an opportunity to

unseat comfortable assumptions about the neat logics of the criminal justice system; inclusion of multiple student and prisoner statements attest to the program's success. Yet, the program's positioning of the prison as a disturbing encounter with otherness intensifies prisoner dehumanization—an effect reinforced by an even more theatrical staging of Pompa's own first encounter:

... a sensory cacophony of stale sweat, old sneakers, clanging bars, crumbling cement, deafening announcements over the P.A. system, and men...hundreds of men, who seemed to be locked in some bizarre dance, a listless fugue arrested in time (24).

This appeal to the prison's affective structure—atomizing prisoners into sounds, smells, and metonymies that rankle in their intensity—resonates with anyone who has ever visited a prison and been unnerved by its atmosphere. Yet the language also evokes the damaging fabulation of slave suffering described by Morrison, and a voyeurism Rodríguez (2002) might call, a “structure of enjoyment that thrives from the horror of an imprisoned Other's suffering” (411): so moved, Pompa (2004) recalls a desire to uncover “...truths hidden beneath the surface that begged to be revealed” (24-25), enticing readers to follow.

This rhetorical strategy is a shrewd one, dressing the set of the prison's strangeness, to be transformed by offering a pedagogy that dramatically undermines that otherness to embrace prisoners' humanity—a satisfying, Aristotelian reversal that shares poetic terrain with the liberal subject's cathartic revelation of whiteness described by Ryden and Marshall (2012, 132). Given its range of circulation, that strategy is also a successful one, positioning expectations and rewards for the reader with each successive telling. Jean Trounstine (2014) takes up the discursive mantle 10 years after the *Reflections* special edition, recounting a tense exchange during a theater workshop. Though Trounstine recognizes the incommensurability of prisoners' experiences (153) and employs dialogue allowing the women to speak for themselves, the text nevertheless conflates prisoners with darkness and darkness with the unknown in every human, asking, “What other dark secrets lay in the hearts of these women who stood before me? For that matter, in



any of us?" (160). Given that she recalls an experience decades' past, one might reasonably conclude that this aside simply keys the reader into the affective structure of that memory—the imprint of fear and discomfort, just as Pompa recalls her first encounter in sensory terms. Yet, the language employed places Trounstine's narrative squarely in the discursive circuitries described by Morrison, rendering workshop participants as props in a larger drama.<sup>14</sup>

## **LITERACY, HANDMAIDEN OF THE HUMAN**

Though tropes of darkness, light, and prison-as-frontier might surface in an array of prison-based genres of practice, the figure of literacy as the vehicle for personhood makes the critical-rhetorical stakes particularly acute for rhet-comp and community literacy. Here, too, McBride's (2001) literary scholarship proves instructive, identifying this particular feature of white-abolitionist discourse in Margaret Fuller's 1845 review of Frederick Douglass's autobiography, deployed to combat perceptions of African inhumanity. Fuller's review affirms the role of written testimony in not only humanizing the slave, but also legitimating the (white) witness as an arbiter of ability. While acknowledging the review as radical for the time (McBride 2001, 75), McBride contends that its rhetoric—circumscribed by the racialized discourse that defined the terms of exchange with a white audience—subverts Fuller's intended meaning. Where she chastises those “spendthrift dandies, or the blows of mercenary brutes, in whom there is no whiteness except of the skin, no humanity except in the outward form” (Fuller, qtd. in McBride 2001, 76),<sup>15</sup> McBride argues that she re-inscribes a racial hierarchy determined by culture rather than phenotype (77). In McBride's reading, then, emancipation—and humanity itself—depend on written ability, making proponents of literacy handmaidens of the human, moving enslaved subjects from raced unbeing/unknowing to enlightened personhood.

Despite scrupulous attention to reciprocity (Berry 2017; Carter 2014; Holmes 2015; Pompa 2004; Reynolds 2014; Ryder 2016), wariness of the rehabilitative rhetoric shaping the literacy narrative genre (Hartnett et al 2011; Rogers et al 2017; Rolston 2011; Jacobi 2008; Jacobi and Johnston 2011; Sutcliffe 2015), and critiques of dominant literacy narratives that feature the “triumph of light over darkness” (Harvey Graff, qtd. in Branch 2007, 29), prison-based

composition and literacy scholarship nevertheless participates in the rhetorical economy McBride describes, employing Morrison's and Smith's language of shadows, darkness, and light to dramatize the transformative power of literacy in particular. Jacobi's (2001) "Speaking Out for Social Justice," for example, extols the virtues of community literacy to bring "writers beyond the shadows of criminal identity into positions of possibility" (52), while Kerr, in a 2006 lecture, relies on opposition of darkness and light to draw contrast between eras permitting prisoner education. Kerr (2006) first employs *chiaroscuro* to describe how increased educational access in the 1970s gave way to "the Dark Ages" (6), gesturing to the common designation for loss of written record coined by Petrarch (Mommsen 1942), then extending the metaphor, first by offering ways to "measure the darkness" of "sheer numbers of people incarcerated, by disproportionate representation of black and Latinos/Latinas" (Kerr 2006, 6).

Kerr's lecture is noteworthy for two reasons, both related to its participation in rhetorical economies that might otherwise appear nonvalent. Scholarship on Petrarchan historiography suggests that Petrarch's poetics contributed to and, in some cases, originated the colonial/othering discourses operant in texts described by Morrison, McBride, and Buck-Morss (2000), even as they predate those texts by several hundred years; Dagenais and Greer (2000) note that, "in the *Africa* Petrarch establishes most of the language which will be key to the European colonization of The Middle Ages: the idea that there is ... a squalid time of shadows which follows Roman Antiquity and which will in turn be followed by a second coming of light, of radiance" (434). Even as Kerr's lecture invokes light and darkness to signal contraction of educational access, the discursive genealogy behind the term yokes that darkness to a barbarism opposite the illumination that only education—and all its positive associations with civilization—can bestow. The abilities emerging from educational access, by contrast, necessarily bring prisoners into the light—the renaissance Kerr describes. The second figuration, however—"measure[ing] the darkness" of "countless numbers" of black and brown bodies (Kerr 2006, 6)—binds the darkness of reduced educational access explicitly to the raced bodies of prisoners themselves, thereby extending both the abolitionist discourse

McBride describes and the sentimental voyeurism Han (2012, 3) and Rodríguez (2002, 411) caution against.

These rhetorical moves are subtler than those of Deborah Appleman, who explicitly links the ability endowed by writing to light over dark, saying, in a 2012 CCCC response to Jimmy Santiago Baca, “the transformative power of our pedagogy and the power of language can travel even to the darkest of places through their poetry” (Appleman 2012)—a sentiment she reiterates in “Teaching in the Dark” (Appleman 2012, 24). That account offers up the poetry of Appleman’s students much the same way Fuller exhibits Douglass—as a testimony to literacy’s humanizing powers: “these men become more human when they are learning, reading, and writing” (Appleman 2012, 29).

So, too, does Sister Helen Prejean (2014) participate in this rhetorical economy, noting, in her foreword to *Women, Writing, and Prison*, that, “We can’t enlighten ourselves...until we find ourselves, or put ourselves, in situations that provide an awakening spark” (Jacobi and Folwell Stanford 2014, xv); here, she reiterates a need for dual enlightenment, for both prisoners and those on the outside. Prejean’s foreword, like the scholarship above, labors to persuade audiences of shared humanity between citizens and prisoners towards positive social change; notably, this volume pivots to a lay audience interested in literacy and activism more broadly. Yet, as with other scholar-practitioners and their abolitionist forebears, the language employed opposes unbeing/unknowing to a kind of spiritual and intellectual illumination made possible through literate practice—here, coded as a “spark” that nevertheless confers a humanity distinct from whatever embodied subjectivity prisoners had before: “The work of writing in prison and jails is spiritual work . . . that calls the deepest part of every individual who puts pen to paper and allows them to say, “I am real. I am human” (xvi). One could argue that Prejean’s use of *chiaroscuro* articulates an understanding of self-discovery through writing that is available to a variety of audiences; as sight-dominant beings, we recognize the ready-to-handness of the spark metaphor, as easily as we register a lightbulb. At the same time, that spark as the condition of possibility for the human—combined with the foreword’s framing function for a series of testimonies<sup>16</sup>—places the text squarely in

the path of the discursive circuitries laid by abolitionists, and all the freight those circuitries carry.

The problem is not that scholar-practitioners employ these figurations at all; but neither is the problem that most prison literacy sponsors are white. What these examples do suggest, however, is a need to recognize the relationship between the tactics employed and the materiality of scholar-practitioners' own subjectivities as purveyors of ability, coded as white. This move to some extent undoes advances in the field's awareness of whiteness as a "neutral category" that functions as a universal, socializing mechanism (Kennedy, Middleton and Ratcliffe 2005, 367), even as white practitioners espouse antiracist values.

## **USING WHAT WORKS: MIRRORING THE CODES**

Is it problematic that contemporary prison literacy advocates repeat successful rhetorical strategies from their abolitionist forebears—given that slaves themselves employed the same rhetorical economies to advocate for their emancipation? As McBride (2001) observes of the rhetorical economies animating abolitionism, these strategies—the cultivation of suspense on a dangerous frontier, the satisfying move from dark to light, bondage to freedom, and unbeing to humanity—formed a dynamic in which discourses legible (and satisfying) to white audiences were taken up by slaves *because* of their success. Douglass, for example, recognizes and meets the public's demand for "increasingly revealing and even pruriently detailed" accounts of slave suffering (McBride 2001, 154) by refusing his reader a detailed account of his escape, while mirroring white audiences' familiarity with/investment in rhetorics of Christian brotherhood so as to shame them for hypocrisy (McBride 2001, 156). Importantly, it was Douglass's written ability that rendered him human in the eyes of readers like Fuller, paving the way for wider acceptance of slaves' humanity; that scene of mutual recognition, however, as McBride suggests, retains the logics of whiteness that we see in future testimonies provided by imprisoned writers.

Jimmy Santiago Baca engages in a similar testimonial circuit, having been invited to speak about his writing in Jacobi's classes (Jacobi 2008, 72), and ballroom events like his 2012 CCCC address,

echoing the movements of the speaking circuit of which Douglass was a part.<sup>17</sup> Baca, too, narrates a move from darkness to light in his autobiographical *A Place to Stand*, recalling his prison literacy acquisition as “a linguistic light that illuminated a new me” (Baca 2001, 257), while Judith Clark (2014) employs it to describe her discovery of fellowship with other women poets (51), and Taylor Huey (2014) writes of her desire to “bring society back into the light that for so long has been snuffed out” (192). So, too, do other testimonials employ this figuration, excerpted as evidence in scholar-practitioners’ own arguments about writing’s transformative power (Curry and Jacobi 2017, 8; Rogers 2004, 18; Erlichman 2004, 86).

The troping of darkness and light echoes techniques employed by imprisoned visual artists as well, often equipped with only a golf pencil or the ink shaft of a pen (Ziegler 2015), who employ *chiaroscuro* to capture the light and shadows permeating their otherwise barren surroundings. Treacy Ziegler (2015) cites comments from one writer, Dan, to illustrate this phenomenon: “Now that I see chiaroscuro, I see it everywhere! The patterns of light through the window, the floor, the light bands cast across the corridor. The light that comes through the cell window!” (Ziegler). The slippage between the visual and the metaphorical in prisoner vocabularies, then, suggests that, even as imprisoned writers mirror the raced rhetorical economies inherited from abolitionism and extended by scholar-practitioners, so, too, are they responding to the affective terrain of their environments. If, as Sadie Reynolds (2014), suggests, using terms like “offender” strips prisoners of their humanity by “do[ing] a kind of epistemic violence to them” (106-7), then one might reasonably ask: “Does the physical space of the prison sufficiently explain prisoners’ and scholar-practitioners’ affinity for these rhetorical choices, thereby exposing this line of thinking as itself racially overdetermined?” The answer in both cases might lie in the body as both discursively and physiologically determined.

## SOMATIC INSTRUMENTS

Razor wire and iron bars, too, punctuate poetry and paintings, reminding us of these tropes’ distinctly somatic origins—metaphors for partition, enclosure, dehumanization, suffering, and redemption that coalesce in the repeated bodily movements of prisoners and

prison-based literacy practitioners, alike. Just as Nadya Pittendrigh (2015b) observes of the powerful political rhetoric enacted through supermax prisoners' expressions of bodily suffering (156), so, too, do the affective experiences of scholar-practitioners enact political rhetorics of their own. It follows, then, that we should record and transmit those experiences mindfully, both as a means of rehearsing bodily memory and maintaining methodological rigor.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the somatic as, "Of or relating to the (or a) body; bodily, corporeal, physical" (OED); the somatic encompasses our cells, our circuitries, our skin and our limbs, but also has the capacity to illuminate our understanding of the relationship between individual experience and the kind of affective solidarity that coheres around interpersonal exchange, social groups, and political movements. In her study of rhetorics generated by dancers' bodily memory, LeMesurier (2014) argues that sensation not only "exemplif[ies] the body's capacity ... for storing and using memory and performance," but also constitutes a "conduit for remembered knowledge" (362). Given the turn in rhetorical studies towards fieldwork and an attendant focus on what Aaron Hess calls the phronetic "self-as-instrument" (qtd in LeMesurier 2014, 129), such attunement to bodily memory might aid rhetoricians working in spaces where bodily disposition affects both *ethos* and method; becoming, to adapt Quintilian, a good researcher, *sensing* well.

Yet, important to LeMesurier's work, and to understanding the rhetorical force and mobility of bodied knowledge, is the role of metaphor in capturing that knowledge succinctly—thereby rendering it recognizable and repeatable. We know from Ricoeur (1978) that metaphor enables the appearance of discourse by assuming the body's forms and traits, allowing, in a paraphrase of Aristotle, an epiphoric transfer of meaning from distance to proximity between heterogeneous ideas (147). LeMesurier's (2014) account of somatic metaphor operates much the same way, as it "demonstrate[s] tangible effects of the discourse / body connection" through a process in which bodies are modified through the application of discursive metaphors that are crafted to be recognizable to the dancers' embodiment" (366). And yet—to the extent that metaphors make those somatic storehouses portable, they become potent instruments

for the bodies politic John Protevi (2009) describes as scaling from personal affective experience to a civic body with the potential to shape movements and institutions. Protevi writes, “Individual bodies politic are cognitive agents that actively make sense of situations: they constitute significations by establishing value for themselves, and they adopt an orientation or direction of action” (33). However, what he calls a personal “political physiology” shapes the interactions and shared affective experiences of groups, which, in turn, make up “the patterns and triggers of institutional action” (xii). LeMesurier’s somatic metaphor helps translate Protevi’s scaled understanding of affect as it moves from individual to wider political bodies by narrating the process by which repeated sensory experience accrues to memory, coalescing in the figured forms that might travel from body to body as useful knowledge—hence the ready-to-handness of language around prisons: dangerous frontiers, darkness, and light. LeMesurier (2014) gestures to this process when she reimagines Cicero’s tale of Simonides, in which Simonides’s repeated bodily movements not only summon the richness of memory but testify to arrangement as a rhetorical force. She observes that, “Defining memory in terms of action, how one moves through memory in order to enact it and to make it useful, allows rhetoricians to best consider how memory and recognition operate in tandem” (366).

This process—from bodied experience, to somatic metaphor, to rhetorical action—has implications for prison-based writing scholarship, insofar as individual somatic rituals within prison walls create a political physiology that, in turn, contributes to the formation of civic bodies capable of shaping institutional action. In other words, though one might step into a well-used rhetorical pathway to evoke the intensities of personal bodily response, that utterance nevertheless has the capacity to shape and even impede the movements of other travelers where the troughs become so well-worn that other paths become unthinkable. To the extent that scholar-practitioners in community literacy and rhet-comp maintain disciplinary investments in writing’s capacities for change, scaling from classroom to culture—it follows that rhetorical scholarship representing prisoner voices must examine the broader social and political implications of that scholarship’s rhetorical choices—particularly where those choices are influenced by, and intended to evoke, the singularly charged space of the prison.



The peril lies in the mobility of such somatic metaphors beyond the interpersonal—and the extent to which these particular storehouses of physical memory aid and abet racialized discourse. To return to Protevi’s account of somatic physiology, the point where affect moves beyond the personal to groups to publics is the point where prison-based researchers—or any researchers working with communities of color—need to consider (or at the very least acknowledge) the discursive implications of the language we use to describe embodied experience, however perilous, or bathed in the very real light and shadow of carceral space.

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I do not write this piece to police the poetic impulses of writers on either side of prison walls, any more than I think excising these tropes would somehow bring about some new era of emancipatory possibility. The primacy of the visual as an heuristic explains the availability of these tropes to articulate any number of struggles. Curry and Jacobi (2017), however, model how we might mobilize language to evoke the affective experience of the prison without resorting to vexed rhetorical economies:

Entering jail is an assault on the senses. Thick recirculated air feels either drafty or stuffy, never comfortable. The walls protrude with a stark, dingy white, bare of character or care. The smell is sterile, some unidentifiable cleanser stinging the tongue and nostrils. Doors clang shut and open via invisible mechanics (5).

Here, the writers focus on the structural, ambient qualities of prison architecture; this assault on the senses codes the prison as dehumanizing in and of itself, rather than rendering prisoners as props in the larger drama of literacy’s humanizing light. Nadya Pittendrigh (2015a) observes of her own research that, “service learning and community engagement function as powerful pedagogy precisely because they are so all-consuming” (42), suggesting a complex knot of affective and emotional experience shaped by the hours and even years spent with prisoners writing on the inside. Perhaps, as rhetorical instruments, we might pause more often to attune our awarenesses in scenes of bodily discomfort, including



those that accrue in routine movements and bodily response; in so doing, we might better calibrate our language to account for both the immediacy of affect and the discursive substrates that shape our shared vocabulary.

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## NOTES

- 1 Ryden and Marshall suggest that “moral accounting” reveals racial discursive structures (2012, 14), but also “recenter(s) the white subject by paying attention to the particularity of whiteness in its various incarnations” (2012, 5). That prison is shaped significantly by racialized discourse suggests that literacy sponsorship in prison faces similar challenges.
- 2 Hartnett et al (2011, viii), Kerr (2004), and Plemons (2013) write about the marginalizing effects that prison-based pedagogies may incur despite scholar-practitioners’ progressive intentions.
- 3 Insofar as prisoners are, via the 13th amendment, “slaves of the state” (Dayan 2001, 16)—and therefore what Dylan Rodríguez (2002) would characterize as, “never *free to write*” of their own volition (409), scholar-practitioners face the ethical and epistemological impossibility of scholarship on prison writing broadly conceived. Here, however well-intentioned, writing about prisoners necessarily reproduces a kind of spectacle in a larger, American-constitutional drama; Cory Holding affirms these difficulties for community literacy research, noting prison-based writing’s illegibility to university-based methods, and wondering “whether free (not incarcerated) researchers should be undertaking such projects in the first place” (Rogers et al 2017, 83).
- 4 Caleb Smith (2008), citing Morrison, identifies a similar kind of chiaroscuro in American literature’s treatment of prisoner and penitentiary, with frequent reference to how “corpses of the law” become a kind of “shadow” (253).
- 5 The 2010 Census indicated that the populations of whites and blacks were nearly equal (39 and 40 percent respectively) in prisons nationally (Sakala 2014).
- 6 Angela Y. Davis (2005, 35-38) and Michelle Alexander (2012) chronicle the interplay of these factors as they culminate in the

formation of what Alexander calls a “caste” system (2012, 12) for African Americans, disenfranchised and systematically denied justice.

- 7 While James’s rendering is somewhat reductive, its identification of “controlling” discourse highlights the reality of the unequal power relations inscribed in the prisoner sponsorship dynamic, particularly as texts generated by prisoners constitute emotional and intellectual labor redirected by sponsors for an array of purposes, often exceeding those texts’ original purpose.
- 8 Curry and Jacobi (2017) challenge Coogan’s preference for peer-reviewed publication over self-publishing, arguing that such efforts towards legibility in fact reinforce dominant discourse (14). Others, like Kerr (2004), acknowledge the naïveté of attempting to mitigate powerful representations of prison through written exchange between students and inmates.
- 9 Jacobi and imprisoned writer Elliot Johnston elsewhere note the already asymmetric power relations inscribed by the sponsorship designation (Jacobi and Johnston 2008).
- 10 Hartnett et al (2011) echo this call for recentering imprisoned writers themselves, and a pedagogy “rooted in the lived experiences of those populations most directly affected by the structures of inequality” (333).
- 11 Patrick Berry (2014) reiterates this caution, observing that “hopes and beliefs about the power of reading and writing ... vary among students and their teachers” (5).
- 12 Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe (2005) acknowledge Morrison’s piece as seminal for bringing whiteness studies to Rhet/Comp (Kennedy et al 2005, 360), working in tandem with contributions to critical race theory.
- 13 Caleb Smith (2008), too, describes prisoners as a “shadow” (253) in the poetics of the penitentiary.



- 14 Trounstone (2014b) elsewhere uses figures of light and darkness to dramatize the impact of her theater workshops in *Shakespeare behind Bars*, promoted by publishers as, “shed[ding] a compassionate light in a dark world.”
- 15 Here, Fuller shares terrain with Hegel, who used the slave to explore philosophical questions of freedom and consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). As historian Susan Buck-Morss (2000) explains, Hegel struggled to give shape to that project until the onset of the Haitian revolt (852).
- 16 The positioning of Prejean’s statement operates as a mode of authentication to legitimize and confer moral authority, as abolitionists did for slave autobiographies targeting white audiences (Stepto 1991, Sidonie Smith 1974, 9)—by all accounts, rhetorically successful strategies, given slave narratives’ proliferation preceding the Civil War (McBride 2001, 153).
- 17 Plemons and Kerr participate in a similar sponsorship circuit, sharing the story and writings of Spoon Jackson in conference presentations (Kerr 2011, 2012), college classroom exchange settings (Kerr, qtd. in Jackson), print (Plemons 2012, 2013), and even Twitter (Plemons, 2010). San Quentin-based prison educator Judith Tannenbaum collaborated with Jackson to co-write *By Heart: Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives*, a text Spoon partially voice-recorded, now posted on YouTube (atnightlyfilm 2010). Plemons tweeted the link to publicize the memoir’s publication (Plemons 2010).

**Libby Catchings** is Teaching Assistant Professor in the Denver University Writing Program, and DU PAI affiliate faculty in Colorado corrections facilities. Working at the intersection of critical prison studies, theories of the public sphere, and rhetorical field studies, her research examines the truth-telling practices and hip-hop poetics of juvenile detainees, and the procedural rhetorics of student craft/DIY practices. She has previously worked as a prison literacy coordinator for the Fresno Center for Nonviolence, an assistant editor for California Prison Focus, and a program evaluator/facilitator for The Beat Within (a workshop-to-publication program in juvenile detention facilities). Having studied theories of slavery and incarceration with Angela Y. Davis via the Critical Theory Institute, Libby received her PhD at the University of California, Irvine.

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# Friends

**Stephen LaValle**

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It's rather wonderful, I think  
when Friends are made of pen and ink,  
a piece of paper, blue or white  
And someone decides that she will write.  
To someone she has never seen  
who lives where she has never been  
A pen becomes a magic wand  
Two strangers begin to correspond.  
Two strangers long, but soon good  
Friends, Just note how their last letter ends.  
How pleasant on important news  
Two Friends quite Far apart  
Can gladden each other's heart,  
Can nourish each other's mind  
with goodly thoughts in letters kind it's  
truly wonderful I think.

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# The Everglades’ Forgotten Fauna: Jailbirds

**Kathie Klarreich**

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*Kathie Klarreich reflects on her experience as a writing facilitator in South Florida prisons. Two South Florida prisons sit on the edge of the Everglades. Klarreich, founder of the prison writing organization Exchange for Change, examines her own relationship to, and that of, the endangered lives on both sides of the razor wire, and the haunting and fortunate experience of her crossing so frequently between them.*

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**B**y the time I see the billboard “Cracker Barrel, 12 miles Ahead,” my breathing has slowed. I’ve exhaled 25 miles of Miami congestion and now it’s just fields and flowers plus a few housing developments on mini man-made lakes. The scenery stays the same but today the spot where a boat usually sits on a makeshift beach is empty. Gone, too, is its red, handwritten “For Sale” sign with a local 305 area code number. Perhaps the dinghy has finally set sail.

The turnpike ends a few miles farther, and signs for the Everglades begin, along with signs for two of Florida's correctional institutions. Prisons, in other words. Not that the prison signs are necessary. The double-decked razor wire fence is the first giveaway. It's also the last thing you see before a right-hand turn off SW 192nd Avenue to reach Everglades National Park.

In 2015, The National Audubon Society (NAS) recognized the Everglades as a Global Significant Bird Area. Forty-two globally significant birds, to be exact. Three-hundred and fifty species live in the park. This salt and fresh water wilderness received the NAS distinction because it contains a significant population of endangered or threatened species that live, breed, or migrate in this unique ecosystem. Bald eagles, arctic peregrine falcons, roseate terns, piping plovers—they use the Everglades like tourists use Best Westerns, a place to stop, rest, refuel.

Sailors like the snail kite don't know boundaries any more than they know they have been labeled "endangered," so the restrictions to enter the grounds of the Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) mean as little to them as their threatened status. The snail kite does its thing like any other bird. It just flies. Wherever. Whenever.

On occasion, the inmates who co-habitat with the snail kite or the Cape Sable seaside sparrow or the red-cockaded wood pecker may spot this winged wildlife flying overhead. Such sightings may be a prisoner's sole boasting right. Finding a silver lining behind bars can require an albatross-sized wing span.

Three high-security prisons border the Everglades: Dade Correctional Institution (DCI) for men and Homestead Correctional Institution (HCI) are housed on the same compound, the one on SW 192. They sit on the southeastern part of the 1.5 million acres that encompass the Everglades. Everglades Correctional Institution (ECI) for men is on the northern border. It's just off highway 41, which, as it snakes east, becomes Calle Ocho, best known for Cuban exiles, *Carnaval*, and cortaditos.

Shark Valley is further west from the ECI turnoff. It's a tourist attraction of sorts, after the Buffalo Everglades Trading Post and Airboat Rides. Here, bicycles and buses allow close proximity to the reptiles. I took my son there when he was eight. He liked the idea of popping wheelies as he pedaled by the creatures. It was spring and there were more baby critters than we could count; we stopped after 100, and we were only halfway through the 15-mile loop.

Another time, when I was driving with my mother, an alligator blocked the road. For some reason, my mother took the apple she was eating and pitched it at the gator. It didn't blink.

Parallel to Calle Ocho but further north is Interstate 75. It connects the lower east and west coast of Florida. A stretch of it is called "Alligator Alley," a name that needs no explanation. A while back an alligator, miles from the Everglades, jumped out of a lake and consumed a 47-year old woman who had been walking her dog. Some alligators don't play.

The United States National Park Service presides over the country's 58 national parks. Three are in Florida, but the Everglades is unique—it's the largest subtropical wilderness in the country. Florida's DOC oversees 56 state prisons, plus seven that are privately run. I organize and facilitate writing workshops in two that border the Everglades. Combined, those prisons house nearly 3,000 people.

Getting locked up isn't difficult if you've committed a crime, or if you're black. Otherwise, getting inside prison is a bit more complicated. No easy flyover here. Most days, the routine is the same: I present my license to a security officer in the control room, punch in my PIN, receive a visitor's badge and then pass through the first set of steel doors to an enclosed, tightly hermetic room that suffers from a dearth of fresh air and too much air-conditioning. Another officer asks me if I am in possession of narcotics, contraband, a cell phone, money over \$60, electronics, weapons or firearms. I answer *no, no, no, no, no, no*, and *no*, which everyone does, of course, but that hasn't stopped any of these things from making their way inside. My own students estimate that 70 percent of those with whom they are locked up have cell phones. I don't want to know if that's true or not.

Next, I pass through another set of doors into an equally airtight, frigid room where I'm given a body alarm, which is required but not always available. When it is, I clip it to my clothes and pass through another set of doors. They click open and clang close and then it's all moist marsh air, weighted with humidity. No sunscreen or sexy strapless here, just baggy clothes under which sweat immediately starts to drip. Mosquitoes buzz. Heat penetrates. More mosquitoes. More heat.

Instinctively, I look up at the sky, the same sky I just left on the other side of the gate, but it's South Florida, after all; weather is as fickle as a shooting star. Sun can turn to rain in minutes. If I'm lucky, I might glimpse a bird or a formation but most of the time it's just sun. Relentless sun.

I approach my classroom the same way a Key Largo cotton mouse moves across an open field—wary but determined. I'm never sure what's gone on before I arrive or what's lurking; problems in prison come in many forms, and not necessarily from those clothed in blues.

Save for their standard uniform—blue pants with a white stripe for men, pants or a smock-like dresses for women, state-approved shoes, and DOC name tags—my students resemble those in other places I've taught. Cosmopolitan. Alphas and omegas. Old and young, black and white, Hispanic and European. I have a set schedule for the hours I am supposed to teach but I'm subject to my environment. Not just the atmospheric one that impacts the Everglades—the compound closes when there's lightning—but all the other ones that are out of my control. Many times I've arrived only to discover that the compound is on lockdown. Once because an inmate took flight. Several times it was because there was a fight that broke out over a pecking order. Or a medical emergency at the hand of an inmate or, just as easily, an officer, who used to be called a “guard.” On occasion it's the officer who is injured. I don't pretend to know anything that happens during the 140-plus hours of the week I am not there.

There's a “hunt or be hunted” in the Everglades that no amount of protected status will change. Sometimes the weak survive, but more often they don't. It's not so different in prison.

The panther is at the top of the local food chain of the wildlife found in the Everglades. As far as I know, there's never been a panther sighting on a prison compound, though they can leap 15 feet vertically and 45 feet horizontally. The rape of land that threatens the local ecology has reduced the panther population to just over 100. To survive, a male panther needs an average of 200 square miles.

The average size for a two-man prison cell is 8 x 10 feet. There is no air-conditioning in prison dorms—South Florida, remember.

The type of crime often determines the type of dorm. In addition to the two-person cell, there is the open bay dorm. A bit like Shark Valley after mating season—dozens of people to your right and left, up or down, depending on your bunk assignment.

Everyone in prison has a job. The male institutions have a program that allows certain inmates to work outside the compound. The woman's prison has a dog-training program. The job that everyone seems to hate is kitchen duty. For a prison with more than 1,500 inmates, that's a lot of meals. When trucks come on the compound to deliver food, or fuel—lockdown. I have had class cancelled for that reason, too.

Tuesday is chicken day. Everyone loves Tuesdays. The guys who bring the chicken in, though, they hate it. No matter how many extra pieces they prepare, they inevitably run out. "You can't imagine where they hide those breasts," a food supplier told me recently.

Panthers are carnivores. They used to feed off deer, but urbanization has cut down that population too. Today, a panther has to kill and eat about 10 raccoons to equal the food value of one deer. To maintain their health and fitness, adult panthers need to consume the equivalent of about one deer or hog per week. Females with kittens may need twice this amount.

A pair of endangered wood storks needs 440 pounds of fish during a single breeding season to survive. Who counts these things? I've often wondered.



Count is big in prison. Happens five, six times a day. Inmates must wear their identification badges at all times. To the DOC, they are just numbers. In my class, they are just students. But sometimes even getting to class is a challenge. The guys in both camps where I teach have to pass through an extra gate to get to the education building. An officer having a bad day may make that crossing difficult. Or impossible.

My students are nothing if not survivors. They've created techniques to take care of themselves but mostly they crouch to stay below the radar. Literally. Camouflage. Survival requires retreat. Prey comes in many forms.

I know all this but still I push my students to forget about their outside environment for the two hours I have them in class. I push them to expose emotions that live beneath the surface. Or have been buried for years. I also push them to write about what they know. One student rescued a palm warbler impaled on the razor wire and wrote about the experience of holding freedom, just for an instant. Another wrote a story about a spider and a cockroach, dorm wildlife he knows all too well. The story ends with the spider and cockroach escaping their cell by turning into birds and flying away.

There's a story about geese that I use in class as a writing prompt. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in a V formation, the flock can fly at least 71 percent farther than if each bird flew on its own.

When a goose falls out of formation, it feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone, so it quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it. Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to maintain their speed. And when a goose gets sick—or is wounded by gunshots—and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to lend help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies. Only then do they launch out on their own, or with another formation to catch up with their group.

If only we all showed the same solidarity as geese.

Inmates by definition aren't allowed to flap their wings. But some who come in damaged want to learn how to fly again, want to soar in a new direction. They know that the outside world isn't all that welcoming. It, like the Everglades, could use a bit of restoration.

My exit after class mirrors my arrival. I hand in my body alarm and identification card, punch in my PIN, and walk through the two sets of heavy steel doors. When I hear the final clang behind me, I take a moment to look up at the sky and give thanks. Last week I saw a flock of geese flying south. True story.

I start my drive north with the windows open, mindful of the freshness. The heat dissipates with the distance. Late in the day, the canals reflect the sun, melting pinks and oranges. The water along the mini lakes ripples that light. I drive in silence, recalling the conversations and the stories, wanting to remember them without feeling the restriction of their confinement. I can't. They are inseparable.

I drive past the fields and the flowers, the housing developments, the pineapple plantations. The boat I thought had set sail is back again. Only now, the "For Sale" sign is missing. For some, there's no escape.

**Kathie Klarreich** is founder and Executive Director of Exchange for Change, a nonprofit organization that teaches a broad range of writing classes in South Florida prisons. E4C also runs written, anonymous letter-writing exchanges between its incarcerated students and students in local academic institutions. Her current work was influenced by her 30-year freelance journalism career, half of which was spent in Haiti. She has reported for print (TIME, New York Times, Christian Science Monitor), radio (NPR) and television (NBC, ABC). She authored *Madame Dread: A Tale of Love, Vodou and Civil Strife in Haiti* and is also published in two anthologies, as well as numerous magazines and newspapers. In 2010, following Haiti's earthquake, she was awarded a Knight International Journalism Fellowship to train Haitian journalists in investigative reporting. She is also a writing coach for the nonprofit Images and Voices of Hope, which advocates for restorative narratives that amplify the voice of those often ignored in mainstream media.

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# The Effects of Educational Programs in Prison Towards Overall Rehabilitation: The Observations and Perspective of a Prisoner

Christopher Malec

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*This essay represents Christopher Malec's original research and writing, with slight final edits completed by Wendy Hinshaw on his behalf.*

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## EXCHANGE FOR CHANGE: THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION AND ELIMINATING MISCONCEPTIONS

**T**wice, and sometimes even three times a week, Kathie Klarreich enters the front entry gate of Dade Correctional Institution to teach creative writing. Armed with a see-through plastic carrying case filled with pencils, paper, and the day's assignments and handouts, she's ready to bash the monotonous lives of the prisoners with stimulating reads and intriguing prompts to get the creative juices flowing, something which prisoners are rarely afforded in the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC). Ms. Klarreich is quite the facilitator though, as she goes the extra

mile for people incarcerated; there are a total of fourteen classes spread through five institutions that teach creative writing, thanks to her. She started an organization called Exchange for Change for the purpose of bringing and teaching her own well-documented skills to prisoners. She originally started in a women's prison and later expanded to male prisons. After her organization started receiving support, she was able to employ facilitators to teach multiple classes at different levels, for different things including Creative Writing 101, Creative Writing Advanced, Spanish Creative Writing, Poetry, Debate, Journalism, Rhetoric, and Writing Exchange.

Writing Exchange is by far the most unique, and having been a benefactor of the class, I can express some of the magic it casts on a prisoner's dull existence. The exchange occurs between the inmates and students from either a college or a high school. There is an absolute adherence to anonymity, so everyone is secure on both ends, but that also gives everyone the opportunity to express themselves freely without worry of being identified. The exchange usually begins with a story or a prompt, which both partners read and simultaneously respond to. The finished pieces are then exchanged for each partner to reply to. In the replies, we are able to relate, give personal advice, show sympathy, and express ourselves in a very human way. Once the replies are exchanged, there is an opportunity to answer and say farewell before switching partners and starting the process again. But what can occur in that short time is sometimes unbelievable; the connection made can be life-altering on either side, and more than anything, another misconception is broken.

For the prisoner, many of whom have limited contact with the outside world, the ability to give honest advice and feedback is a chance to have his/her voice *heard*. And ten times out of ten, prisoners use it in a positive manner, awakening and solidifying some of the rehabilitative processes that began with their intention to join a betterment program. Further, the reception they receive from their partner helps minimize some of the fears they have of returning to a cold world full of cold shoulders. The students are something like some of the people they will encounter, and that can alleviate the stigmatization many of us feel.

For the student, aside from being accredited for another class, they get to see that the prisoner is really human. The fact that these students may someday be a future lawmaker, prosecutor, lawyer, judge, congressman, or be a part of any branch of government is then complemented by *real experience* with actual prisoners; the people they may affect the most with their decisions. They've had actual interaction with the people they can either hurt or help. And their choices speak for themselves. Some of the students have even ended up in the Exchange for Change office seeking work or a way to help because of what they experienced in the program.

So in a very real way, Exchange for Change goes the extra mile by incorporating more than just a facilitator to help rehabilitate the prisoner. Multiple people involve themselves wholeheartedly in the movement that is changing views on both sides. Exchange for Change is bridging a gap not just between minds, but hearts as well.

Why aren't programs like this in every prison? And why don't more prisoners push for them?

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WILLING STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND ITS EFFECTS**

Aside from the basic classes provided, like adult basic education courses that prepare prisoners for the GED and English as a second language, many prisoners in the state of Florida must seek out either religious services or re-entry programs for any kind of positive stimulation. Re-entry classes and vocational courses (if the institution has any, as they are rare) are generally reserved for people with three years or less remaining on their sentence and are therefore not available to the people serving lengthy sentences. The problem with this factor is that the people with the lengthy sentences usually want to join the classes the most, just to get away from the compound's negativity, if nothing else.

Betterment programs however, are not so strict when it comes to classroom rosters, and they offer a wide panorama of interesting subjects to be learned. I've seen such courses as Creative Writing, the Life Course from Prison Life Inc., Civics 101 and 201, Financial

Happiness, Debate, Rhetoric, and Poetry facilitated by outside volunteers. There have also been classes to learn Italian, General Knowledge, Horticulture, Spanish, Money Matters, and Art, facilitated by inmates qualified to teach the specific fundamentals of the subject.

However, classroom size is limited, and the number often decreases through the semester, sometimes due to disciplinary measures or transfers. Those who do make it to the end receive a certificate for completion and attendance, and perhaps a spot in the next course if it is a class that progressively levels up. But mainly, the inmate's biggest reward is the skill and knowledge earned through dedication. Betterment certificates are arguably worth more than any trade certification available, as there is no real incentive to obtain one of these certificates other than one's real interest in transformation of skill and character. To trudge through the thick aggravations of security, extended counts, and share time with other inmates who would normally be avoided is an extra stress that many people would shun altogether, regardless of any education provided. And yet, the prisoners and facilitators alike muscle through in order to get the job done. This level of dedication is a testament to the development of character and determination of the individual's desire to change for the better. There is no incentive other than a new perspective and abstract tools to apply to the objectivity of everyday life.

However, a stick in the spokes keeping this wheel from turning lies in the fact that inmate facilitators do not have all the skills or desire to teach all these courses, and when they do, they are not given the resources or permission to do so. Thus, volunteers are a prevalent need due to an extreme shortage in availability and funding.

## **THE NEED FOR VOLUNTEER FACILITATORS: THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRISONER**

Entering a prison can be a frightening idea to any free-world person, especially with the mainstream media's depiction of what takes place behind the confines of 15-foot fences topped with razor-wire. Most people picture the inhabitants as a thousand hardened faces perched

above tattoo-filled bodies full of anger, hatred, and evil. What the volunteers facilitating programs find is quite another story altogether.

In a very real sense, volunteers see the prisoners for what they are: Human Beings. The sense of which we are deprived of on a regular basis. Officers refer to us as “inmate,” “convict,” “prisoner,” or our last name when they decide to keep it professional. When they don’t, the range of titles varies from among “dipshit,” “asshole,” racially derogatory or sexually preferenced derogatory names, to pretty much all things profane. The demeaning treatment is somewhat akin to the way I picture slaves being treated prior to Amendment XIII of the U.S. Constitution taking effect.

But sadly, officers are not the only perpetrators. Other prisoners are a big part of the dehumanizing taking place. Sex offenders of any kind are stigmatized, belittled, and victimized by other prisoners. Homosexuals are avoided, discriminated against, and viewed as disease carriers; commonly referred to as “punks,” “boogers,” and “fags.” Anyone who smokes spice (synthetic marijuana), or partakes of other illicit substances is looked at like a bum or filth, taking on the identifiers of “junkie,” “baser,” or “\_ \_-head” according to their vice. And if you do none of the above, you’re a “mark” or a “square,” i.e., a “good boy,” and therefore liable to snitch or not “keep it 100.” In other words, if you’re not doing what everyone else is, you’re biased against; if you do, you still are.

Added to this already tense atmosphere is (another factor to be included at certain Florida prisons) the consumption of psychotropic medication and earning the title of being a “bug.” The general mindset at “psych institutions” is that if the person you are talking to is not “psych,” then they think you are, and therefore the air of communication is even more untrusting. What if you lived life suspecting that every person you talked to was mentally ill? Can you imagine going through everyday life in that state of mind? It cannot be healthy, and arguably, can lead to real mental health issues.

In some ways, for those participants of direct betterment programs, the volunteers are the only reminder that we *are human*. They call us by our first names, talk to us about things outside of prison, and



take the time to teach us on individual basis when they can. They encourage, motivate, and congratulate us on our progress. They bring their own resources, give us their time, and even show up to our graduations in place of the family and friends who are unpermitted to attend.

It is no wonder then, that these people become an inspiration to the prisoner. That is why it is they who get mentioned in the graduation speeches and are new topics of conversation for classmates and other prisoners on the compound. Inmates even lend the volunteers credit for being the reason that they stay out of confinement out of fear of being taken out of the class and losing their spot. In doing so, the volunteers are reawakening what corrections should be: a sense of responsibility, decision-making skills, and learning to prioritize what matters most. It is actual rehabilitation taking place, and all the volunteer does is show up and *care*. Care, for once, is provided to the prisoner where it did not exist before, causing a change in character to occur.

If care is the basic principle that inspires rehabilitation in a person, and just one person's care can affect many, what can many people working towards the rehabilitative process accomplish?

## **THE PRISONER'S PERSPECTIVE**

From my cluttered desk in the back of the law library where I've been assigned to work the last four and a half years of my life, I'm in a beneficial place to observe the things going on around me: a position most anyone in prison cherishes. Aside from being able to spot trouble, arguments, or even unfavorable staff, there are many other things that come into focus from this highly valued job assignment within the FDC: access to the newest court rulings; first dibs on forms and motions that aren't provided in the housing area; and above all, the ability to put the most hours of work and focus on one's own case. There is also the privilege of getting the pick of the litter from the bleak magazine racks, novels-sparse bookshelves, and the outdated behind-the-counter reference section of the general library attached to our section. And, within the last couple of years, easy access to betterment programs.

Through grievances, case law, and the literature cycling through the law library, we witness not only the development of prison culture, but also the Department of Corrections as a systematic whole and the compound atmosphere we inhabit. We then mix this in with our own experience of living in this subculture. We handle disciplinary reports, noting which person is actively engaged in their case instead of prison temptations, and live with each other without much privacy. This puts us at an observational advantage to see how these betterment programs affect those who participate with us.

And that perspective is what is mainly missing from the large part of decarceration movements, prison reformation proposals, and mainstream prison talk—no one is talking from the inside. Yet the minds in here can provide the most insights on the perspectives, behavioral traits, and philosophies built inside these walls. How do you know these programs are working for the prisoners? Ask other prisoners. After all, where little other activities exist to distract attention (especially in Florida), most prisoners spend quite some time watching each other.

The education building where these classes take place is located in the same building as the library. Having constant contact with staff and facilitators regularly makes it quite easy for those working in this position to get enrolled in the programs that are offered. Nevertheless, in order for the full potential of these programs to come about in a punishing democracy, there is a bigger question to be pondered: Is educating a prisoner going to help when he feels he'll never get the opportunity to apply what he's learned?

## **THE BIGGER PICTURE: SENTENCING SCHEMES; WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF SEEKING REHABILITATION WHEN NO OPPORTUNITY FOR ITS APPLICATION EXISTS?**

From the last statistic I could locate, in 2016 there were 13,005 life sentences being served in Florida prisons; 8,919 of which were life-without-parole sentences (Nellis). With a population of roughly 100,000 prisoners, that means about one in every eight and a half prisoners has a life sentence. And "Life" in Florida for a person with no option for parole means just that: Life. Parole was abolished in

1983 for all crimes, but as statutory anomaly left it available to those charged with capital offenses (murder and rape mainly) all the way until 1995. Of those still parole-eligible in the system (more than 4,000), there are less than twenty paroled each year. As Nellis notes, “virtual life sentences” are a “third category of life sentence which refers to a term of imprisonment that a person is unlikely to survive if carried out in full.” Nellis reports that 1,161 Florida prisoners are serving a virtual life sentence. This rounds out to as much as 15% of the Florida prison population judicially destined to die behind bars. With an appeal process in which seventy-some-odd percent of direct appeals lose, and every stage of litigation afterwards finds the percentages of relief dropping, lifers in Florida are short of one thing: Hope.

So what do the prisoners do? They come try to live life on the inside and make the best of it according to their vices. They do drugs, smoke cigarettes, drink homemade alcohol, steal, gamble, join gangs, and embrace sexual activity with other prisoners unprotected. Because in their eyes, its justified by saying, “that’s how I do my time.” And if they feel that they have no hope in overturning a life sentence, who can convince them otherwise?

The problem starts to come in when the short-timers begin to pick up the habits of their newfound “homeboys” so they don’t seem like a “square” or a “mark,” and thus become subject to some form of victimization in the prison setting. These habits are then brought to the streets and planted right back into the community. And so by Florida keeping its attention on releasing fewer criminals and not putting focus into releasing more rehabilitated men, it’s doing one thing: *releasing more criminals*. Criminals breeding, infecting voraciously.

That’s why Florida has the third largest prison population in the United States, with more prisons per square mile than colleges, and some of the harshest sentencing policies in the nation. Before the 1996 S.T.O.P (Stop Turning Out Prisoners) Act, the mindset towards prisoners was “just let them out without worrying about educating them,” and afterwards it turned to “just keep them in without educating them.” Our legislative bodies and voter groups

have still not figured out that you must *educate and release* if a lasting change is to take place, rehabilitation accomplished, and communities strengthened.

Norway gives us the best example to follow; kindergarten teachers must hold a Master's degree and correctional officers must train for *three years* to be certified, compared to the six months it takes in Florida. In places like Norway, and most of Europe as a whole, it is illegal to sentence anyone to life without an opportunity for release. Prisoners in Norway are treated like people, given privileges unheard of in U.S. prisons, and given a proper education. Yet, in spite of prisoners being permitted privileges that would be considered a security threat in Florida prisons, Norway boasts a mere *14 percent recidivism rate* compared to Florida's 85 percent. Numbers don't lie, but some politicians do.

Florida has the third largest prison population in the U.S. and so far has provided little relief from its harsh sentences. Without retroactive sentencing reform, I feel it will be extremely difficult to change the mindset of at least one out of every eight prisoners; the ratio now serving Life in Florida. And if there's one thing I've realized from my cluttered little desk in the law library, it's that it is not enough to change the way a prisoner thinks. The way we think is rooted in the way we feel. Incarcerated or not, we're people too. And if a change is needed, society must shift the way we feel in here. Then watch the thinking processes come alive. But we need hope.

Hope and opportunity.

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# The Truth Will Set You Free:

## Reflections on the Rhetoric of Insight, Responsibility, and Remorse for the Board of Parole Hearings

Mo,  
Stephanie Bower,  
Raymond P.,  
Emily Artiano,  
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& Ben Pack

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*A proliferation of scholarship, teaching, and activism in the field of rhetoric and composition attends to prison writing, as an ethical imperative to combat mass incarceration and its dire consequences (Jacobi, Hinshaw, Berry, Rogers, etc.). However, parole board writing—arguably the genre of writing within prison most closely tied to material liberation—remains largely unexamined, both in legal studies and rhetoric and composition. The authors of this article have been working together for the past three years in a weekly writing workshop for former “lifers”—individuals sentenced to life with the possibility of parole; in this setting, parole board writing comes up often in free writes, discussions, and formal compositions. In fact, some participants have brought the pieces they read to the parole board to workshop for discussion and even continued revision. The article analyzes this prison-writing genre with participants of the workshop who co-author the piece. We argue that the writing and rhetorical performance required of prisoners when they face parole boards enacts institutional and rhetorical constraints while simultaneously carving out new spaces for freedom and resistance.*

*We examine how the parole board has shifted to a standard based on evaluating an inmate’s “insight” into their crimes (as opposed to being evaluated solely on their originary*

crimes), and we show the ways that this shift engenders new tensions between 1) writings that affirm existing power dynamics and narratives of responsibility, accountability, repentance, and transformation and 2) writings that subvert and resist dominant discourses and challenge existing power dynamics. Thus, this carceral writing process is at once coercive and subversive, oppressive and empowering, restraining and liberating for those who participate in it.

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*This essay includes multi-vocal reflections from former prisoners on the parole process alongside analysis produced by professors. These pieces inform one another and can be read in any order. Rather than reconcile or flatten dissonances, we explore how the writing and rhetorical performance required of prisoners before the parole board balances institutional and rhetorical constraints with spaces for freedom and resistance.*

## INTRODUCTION

Soon after his release from prison, Mo, one of the co-authors, was at a writing workshop in a transitional housing facility —Francisco Homes—reading the autobiography he wrote for the parole commission to four University of Southern California professors and several men recently released after serving decades behind bars. The writing was stark: a moving account of a childhood marred by violence, trauma and abuse. In it were the marks of the conflicting agendas at the heart of its production: on one hand the need to make sense of his life, and on the other the need to conform to the narratives available from the commissioners. In our discussion, these marks became fissures, with workshop participants recognizing how parole board narratives are largely formulaic gestures (“Getting you to fess up to whatever they found you guilty of”) and at the same time deeply meaningful processes that helped them arrive at genuine remorse and responsibility for their crimes, knitting together the past, present and future, and toggling between narratives of victimhood and agency, causality and determinism.

A proliferation of scholarship, teaching, and activism in the field of rhetoric and composition attends to prison writing as an ethical imperative to combat mass incarceration (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015;



Berry 2018; Coogan 2015; Plemons 2013). However, parole board narratives—arguably the genre of writing within prison most closely tied to material liberation—remain largely unexamined in legal studies and rhetoric and composition. In our workshops, parole board hearings come up often in free-writes, discussions, and formal compositions. The men describe the work that goes into preparing, choosing, framing, and organizing materials for the portfolio they present to the board, which can include release plans, relapse prevention strategies, book reports, evidence of self-help, letters to the victims, and letters of support from outside advocates. Several participants bring some of the writing they read to the parole board to workshop for discussion and even revision; these pieces commonly include individual histories and reflections and are typically the most personal sections of the writing submitted to the board.

Although the parole process has changed in California over time, in general, eligible prisoners go up for parole at regular multi-year intervals; when denied, the denial includes the length of time the prisoners have to wait before their next hearing (which can sometimes be changed later). When approved by the parole board, prisoners with life sentences must still be approved by the governor. For this article, the authors decided to focus solely on the pieces and stories the Francisco Homes residents shared with us through workshop, whether it be pieces they read to or turned into the board or reflections on their experiences. For scholarship that analyzes the transcripts from hearings and provides an overview of the process, see Weisberg, Mukamal, and Segall (2011) and Victor Shammas (2019). We do not include transcripts from the hearings of authors or other workshop participants, and any references to the hearings and commissioners are based in the workshop participants' shared writings and retellings.

## **PAROLE HEARING INSIGHT—REFLECTION ON PAROLE FROM A FORMER PRISONER**

*Mo*

*Mo wrote this piece for the Francisco Homes writing workshop; it began as a twelve-minute free-write, and he then developed and revised it for this collection.*

A parole hearing for an inmate serving life with the possibility of parole is conducted by two commissioners. They are seen as gods because an inmate's life and future are solely determined by the decision they render.

My hearing is conducted in a medium-sized room with an oak table where both commissioners are seated with computer monitors that are positioned in a way which at times can block their faces. A keyboard, tape recorder and several other electronic gadgets cover the table. Across the table from them sits my attorney and me. Directly behind me are two correctional officers. At the far-left end of the table sits the district attorney. At the extreme right of the room is an area reserved for the victim and/or his/her family.

I am asked a series of questions regarding my physical and mental health in order to make an assessment to determine whether or not I am capable of proceeding with the hearing. Now that protocol has been adhered to, the parole hearing begins.

After getting sworn in and promising to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, the first or one of the first things stated is that “nothing you say here today will change our minds about the facts as we understand them.” The facts in this instance are the verdict rendered by the jury, any and all reports provided by the probation and police departments, as well as all documentation provided by correctional staff.

I must pay close attention to those words. What the commissioner is actually saying is that even if there are discrepancies in the verdict, probation and police reports, or information provided by correctional staff, it doesn't matter. Whatever the jury, probation, and police

reports, or documentation given by correctional staff states, nothing I say will alter that. In short, it's etched in stone.

I want nothing more than to provide the commissioners with facts that the jury was not given. After serving several decades of incarceration and having been reformed, I want to be completely honest and nothing more. Why? Because it serves no purpose to not come clean and give myself the chance to rejoin society. I have participated in decades of self-help programming and have truly transformed. I have changed the way I think and perceive situations, how I respond to people—which when combined, changed my course of actions. I am no longer the same man who entered prison so long ago. These facts are also documented in my prison file and are on display throughout the hearing by way of my conduct and overall demeanor.

Now the games begin. A series of questions is asked, some with a purpose in discovering information pertinent to the finding of suitability for parole. Others are designed to establish or solidify the parameters already in place to reflect the correctness of previous verdicts and reports. However, other questions are asked to check the validity of what answers I gave at previous hearings. Some of the questions asked by the commissioners are redundant since they already have the answers to them.

Examples of a few questions asked of me are:

Q: Have you considered that you might die in prison without the opportunity of ever being granted parole?

A: My thoughts at the time were: *Is he serious, does this jerk actually think I've done all this work on myself to not be in a position to assist others in changing their lives too?* But what actually came out of my mouth was—"Sir, I wasn't sentenced to Life without the possibility of parole. I was sentenced to seventeen years-to-life in prison. However, I do know that life is the controlling aspect of my sentence."

Q: Was it your intent to kill Mr. F.?

A: My thoughts at the time were: *This is not a question, it's actually a statement.*

*But he should know that I did not shoot anyone. All of the evidence points directly to my co-defendant Bobby, who was given a deal for manslaughter and has been out since 1987. Again, what came out of my mouth was—"Sir, although I take full personal and moral responsibility for everything that occurred before, during, and after the commitment of this senseless crime, I was not the actual shooter."*

Q: When are you going to come in here and accept full responsibility for the murder of Mr. F?

A: My actual thoughts were: *Please, don't make me come in here and lie about what really happened.* What I said though was—"Sir, I've been honest about what really took place for the past 29 years." This response solicited a tirade of statements describing why I should spend the remainder of my life in prison—such as: *you are incapable of being honest, dishonestly is in your DNA, prison can be the final resting place for liars.*

Q: I asked was it your intent to kill Mr. F!

A: "I wasn't the actual shooter sir. However, I do take full personal and moral responsibility for everything that happened."

At this point I am given looks of sheer frustration, utter disdain, and outright anger. None of which could be recorded—because of all the electronic equipment present, none have the capacity for video.

Q: When you decide to come into a hearing and tell the truth, it will set you free.

A: "Sir, are you referring to the truth as rendered by the jury verdict, or as I seen it unfold during the actual crime?"

Again, if looks could kill, I would be a corpse. The commissioners looked at each other and gave an audible sigh and looked at me with disgust. I believe their expressions spoke loud and clear to me, saying, *are you that damn dumb and/or slow?*

Actually, I wasn't as dense as they thought. My question was designed to determine whether or not they actually wanted me to tailor my statement of what actually happened that dreadful morning to the facts rendered by the jury and other agencies.

At that instant I decided a lie was absolutely necessary to get out of prison. The truth at this stage was totally irrelevant.

In January 2018, sixteen months after receiving a three-year denial, I was granted parole. The documents used at my hearing to line up with the facts as rendered by the jury, police, and probation officer reports were a total fabrication. Although I am not proud of having to lie to obtain my freedom, I know without any doubt that I would still be there had I not conformed to the dictates provided by both commissioners by confirming THEIR VERSION OF THE TRUTH.

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## **CONFESSION AND THE STATE: FROM AVOWAL TO INSIGHT**

*Stephanie Bower*

*Inspired by Mo's story, Stephanie explores the connections between parole board writings and Foucault's lectures on avowal.*

Mo's reflection highlights the discrepancies between narratives produced for the state and those that seek the truth. It also speaks to how the state mandates that those who wish to be free conform to its version of the truth, since gaps between what the state proclaims and what is true undermine the legitimacy of the entire system. These relationships between power and knowledge are explored by Michel Foucault, in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (2014), a series of lectures in which he focuses on the evolution

of “avowal,” defined as “a verbal act” that ties “the individual to his truth,” and “to the power exerted over him” (19). Beginning with the Greeks, Foucault illustrates a blueprint for the truth-telling mechanism by which individuals constitute themselves within systems of power; that blueprint then becomes central to authorizing and consolidating systems of power. Within the rise of Christianity, Foucault traces an emerging “hermeneutics of the self,” an obligation to search within ourselves for the truth about who we are, which fundamentally depends on acts of verbalization and a written text, rooted within relationships of obedience and submission (148). Seeking evil thoughts—and verbalizing these thoughts—becomes embedded in Christian theology and practice.

In his last lecture, Foucault extends his genealogy of avowal by shifting from sacramental contexts to civil, judicial, and penal institutions. He argues that in the modern penal system, the practice of avowal embeds individuals within its authority by requiring that criminals effectively punish themselves. That is, by confessing their crimes, criminals accept the system’s truth claims that imprison them, and therefore affirm the legitimacy of this system, reintegrating them into the social order. As Foucault argues: “avowal consists not simply of recognizing one’s crime, [but] at the same time recognizing...the validity of the punishment one will suffer” (207). Such recognition shifts the penal system from one of punishment to one that is “corrective” (209). Within these evolving practices emerge new subjectivities and new theories of knowledge. For punishment to be more than retroactive, avowal is a means for the criminals to acknowledge themselves as guilty. But just as “the appetite for avowal” becomes central to mapping together truth and punishment—the “foundation of legitimacy” for the system—so too does it become inadequate to explaining criminality (210). With the introduction of “the avowing subject,” Foucault finds an “irreparable breach in the penal system,” (200) since this subject is “both indispensable to the functioning of the penal machine and at the same time somehow in excess” (200). What Foucault terms “the thorn, the splinter, the wound, the vanishing point, the breach in the entire penal system” (228) is this gap between the need for avowal and its inability to fully explain or map together crime and punishment.

These fissures—between focus on the crime and the criminal, between what happened and why, between the criminal as inherently depraved or containing the possibilities of redemption, between individual or institutional responsibility rooted in biology or society, between the past of the crime and the future of the risk—undergird the penal system’s evolution, toggling between poles of punishment and rehabilitation. After numerous attacks on the parole system in the 1970s—for example, California’s parole board shifted from a rehabilitative model towards one that emphasized retribution—parole boards could deny parole based on the originary offense, and offenses deemed “heinous, atrocious or cruel” were automatic grounds for denial. Under these criteria, virtually no one who had a life sentence and went to the parole board was granted release; parole board hearings were widely considered a sham, and many inmates refused to participate. As Mo suggested in our workshop, “any one in prison would leave in a pine box.”

The increase in prisoners granted parole, from 8 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in 2015, only occurred after two California Supreme Court decisions, *In re Lawrence* and *In re Shaputis*, which required the parole board to shift its decision-making basis from the “heinousness of the crime” to the prisoner’s “current dangerousness” (Young, Mukamal, and Favre-Bulle 2016, 270). While *In re Lawrence* identified the “nexus requirement”—the standard that in denying parole, the commissioners could not use the originary crime as sufficient grounds in and of itself—*In re Shaputis* added that “the presence or absence of insight is a significant factor in determining whether there is a ‘rational nexus’ between the inmate’s dangerous past behavior and the threat the inmate currently poses to public safety.”

This new criterion of “insight” is what resonates with Foucault’s idea of avowal, since it too shifts the focus from knowledge about the crime to knowledge about the criminal. It too requires a “hermeneutics of the self” as inmates seek to produce a version of themselves and their stories that persuades the board through hearings and writings that demonstrate they understand the factors that led them to “bad choices.” We see this dynamic play out in the case of Kevin, a former workshop participant. In his last hearing, Kevin finally gave the board what they wanted—to know the criminal. He had always

been truthful about what had happened, but with the help of another prisoner he decided, “I had to be completely and brutally truthful about *who I was* all those years ago. I had to shine enough light to reflect exactly *the man I was*” (2018, 23) [emphasis added]. In such writings, prisoners map past onto present, providing a narrative that knits two antithetical versions of themselves: the self that committed the crime and the self that seeks release. And the writings and the performance before the board also seek to project an interior self onto an exterior—performing an authentic and honest accounting of their interior landscape.

Researchers who have studied the way insight works within these hearings locate the same tensions that Foucault finds within avowal. Victor Shamma (2019) performed an “ethnographic observation,” gathering evidence from attending the hearings along with interviews with participants. He documents the way that the rhetoric of “rehabilitation,” central to determinations of “suitability” and usually framed in opposition to rhetoric of punishment, is itself caught up within “a retributive logic of austere punishment” (5). The rhetoric of rehabilitation, in other words, compels inmates to fit their stories to affirm false conceptions of their own agency, as well as an equally flawed conception of causality, locating what they are conditioned to identify as the sources of their “bad choices” (10).

But how do inmates perform “insight” to the satisfaction of the parole board commissioners? Shamma discusses the board’s reliance on the inmate’s participation in programs like Victim Awareness, NA, and AA. Commissioners not only ask inmates if they have gone through this programming but quiz them on the steps to assess the genuineness of their participation, effectively outsourcing the measurement of rehabilitation into a mechanistic recitation of steps (10). With limited narratives that conform to the commissioner’s expectations and individualist ideology, inmates must express their internal selves in language that the commissioners understand. As Shamma argues, this demand excludes inmates who haven’t had access to the socially dominant language the commissioners read as “natural” and “authentic.” It also excludes inmates who insist on their innocence or those like Mo whose truth differs from that rendered by the jury. Even the expectations of the genre impose exclusions—



speaking from the heart and speaking authentically are only read as truthful if they conform to formulas the commissioners accept.

The rhetoric of “insight” compels inmates to reflect on their transformation and perform this for the commissioners, using as evidence their participation in programs and recitation of familiar scripts. But embedded in the parole process are other forms of knowledge about the inmate that may override or contradict these routinized performances. Attempting to weigh the different materials most associated with decisions of “suitability,” Young, Mukamal, and Favre-Bulle (2016) found that the multiple types of “psychiatric tests” inmates take during their incarceration can play a “highly significant” role in these decisions (274), even though the supposed objectivity of these tests signals mostly our willingness to mask the inherent mystery and slipperiness of human behavior within the supposed authority of quantifiable data. In their study, the authors found that “an inmate’s expression of remorse or responsibility did not have a significant effect on his or her chances of obtaining a grant” (275). Rather, it was outweighed by in-prison behavior, age, participation in programming, and low numbers on those psychological assessments.

In this vein, even as more inmates are found “suitable” in California, some legal scholars have speculated that the new criterion of “insight” has become another excuse to deny inmates parole (Paratore 2016; Hempel 2010). From this perspective, insight becomes another fallible metric dependent upon the prevalent ideologies of crime and punishment and more designed to prevent risk than to assess genuine transformation (whatever that may mean). In this reading, narratives of insight may simply be a necessary, if ultimately futile step that wraps the state’s punitive function within more touchy-feely coatings of rehabilitation. Yet Foucault’s conception of the “irreparable breach” between the disciplinary mechanisms that produce avowals and the selves they seek to explain also gives room for different ways of inhabiting these spaces and understanding the value of insight.

## RESPONSIBLE HUMANITY

Raymond P.

*While the Board of Parole hearings can be an exercise in manipulation for some, they are a platform to confront self and reconcile trauma for others. Regardless of the hearing decision, the truth always surfaces in the aftermath. Raymond wrote the following piece in that space, four months after being found suitable for parole. He started the day he was told that the governor would “take no further action” in his case, and he was ordered to be released in three days. This is how he passed the time.*

I spent a large part of my twenty years in prison struggling to make sense of that dreaded “R” word... responsibility. How do I take responsibility for something I didn’t personally do? This question tormented me from the moment I walked into prison as an emotionally illiterate seventeen-year-old kid through the process of maturity into the thirty-seven-year-old man I am today preparing to leave prison. I am by no means a victim, but the concept of responsibility is abnormal in my reference group, so accepting responsibility for something even my warped belief system could justify was a glaring example of cognitive dissonance.

I know majority tends to rule what acceptable behavior looks like, and common sense matters to behavior too. But more often than not, to those traumatized outliers, consensus seems like the opposite of healing and more like manipulation. So in this respect, race, culture, and subculture take on exaggerated importance for the individual. In other words, culture greatly motivates rationalization—it dictates how we make sense of behavior to our peer group, and thus makes our behavior and thought process acceptable to ourselves. If we traumatized outliers are lucky, art becomes a vehicle to express disagreement. If not, conformists become the target of bitterness.

Music has always been a cultural safe haven for me. Countless artists have been able to impact or influence my consciousness in some way or another, but none so much as Tupac Shakur. He wrote and delivered lyrics railing against marginalization and inequity so timely for me that his music became the soundtrack of my youth. I have a visceral connection to many of his songs because they gave

voice to my traumas and the feelings I didn't have words for. Certain songs took on different meanings over time, but the constant was Pac and the sense of companionship his music provided; somebody understood. Pac understood and encouraged me to face what had to be faced.

Music was a mirror, like a Rolodex for my feelings. My relation to it and the narrative Pac was weaving had only been building to an awful pinnacle. Whenever I found myself alone or confused about something, I turned to music, and more times than not, it was Pac who spoke truth to my experience, gave voice to my confusion, and reminded me that I wasn't alone. None of those songs spoke so directly and unapologetically to my thoughts and feelings as "Fuck the World" when I came to prison and began to ponder that question "How do I accept responsibility for something I didn't personally do?" His opening line is designed to shock and defy anyone audacious enough to doubt his indignation. He aggressively asks the rhetorical question "Who you callin rapist?! Ain't that a bitch, you devils are so two-faced, wanna see me locked in chains, blocked in shame and gettin' socked by these crooked cops a-gain..."

In my spree of senseless crimes, one of my cohorts decided to sexually assault a woman. He didn't announce his intention and I wrongly assumed he was a "good" criminal who only wanted to rob and beat people up. When he announced to the rest of us what he had done, it was far too late to intervene. From that moment forward, I decided I was a victim in all this. I told myself that *it wasn't my fault what he did. The justice system was targeting me because I had no parents to swoop in and bail me out with the legal support or money like the other three teens.* I believed I was in prison because I was scapegoated and sacrificed as an example in a tourist and retirement community.

It was a story as old as America, a black man/boy railroaded.

But even if all my theories were true, it wouldn't change the fact that I had no right to disrupt people's lives. If I don't look at the facts of my choices, I conveniently get stuck in a victim stance and not only deny the people I harmed their humanity, I also continue to defer my

own. The fact is, my choice to disrupt these lives changed these lives in ways I'll never fully comprehend or be able to undo.

What is responsibility?

Responsibility is not allowing myself to get stuck in the victim stance. It's shedding blame and recrimination. It's a willingness to experience the impact of my choices emotionally and learning to bear the shame. Responsibility is recognizing my choice to do harm, confronting why I made this choice, and taking an active role in the healing process. Responsibility is facing God, seeking forgiveness, and accepting myself as flawed so that I can live in my resolution to first make better choices and second, contribute to healing the harms I created.

So how do I accept responsibility for something I didn't personally do? With a clear understanding of what responsibility is and is not, it becomes extremely simple to answer this question. I accept full and unconditional responsibility for everything I did, enabled, and allowed. I stop distancing myself and trying to give myself an emotional alibi and broaden my understanding of impact to include everyone affected by my choices. I did this. In hindsight, I'm grateful for the opportunity to redefine myself and rediscover a sense of empathy and insight and become painfully reacquainted with humanity.

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## **RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

*Emily Artiano*

*Emily's approach applies code meshing to the rhetoric that prisoners create for the parole board and analyzes some of those writings and reflections on that work.*

What forms of knowledge do prisoners gain and produce through writings and performances? Where do we see prisoners' agency

and resistance? Successful parole narratives are avowals predicated on truth and personal responsibility—narratives that “shoehorn a heterogeneity of contexts and experiences into predetermined forms while privileging individual character over social context” (Roy 2018, 43). However, within the genre of parole narratives, we observe how prisoners, specifically lifers, compose and revise parole board rhetoric and subvert dominant scripts that traditionally act as gatekeepers for release.

The processes by which these men construct and collaboratively revise parole board narratives do not necessarily constitute counternarratives to the institutional script required for parole; instead they suggest subtle resistance while adhering to the script. Rather than passively accept the genre as the singular measure of their transformation and suitability, the prisoners deny a narrative solely based on personal responsibility and use writing to enact agency and social responsibility to one another. When deemed “successful” by the board, their actions constitute a space in which former prisoners can critique the penal system with less fear of physical retaliation.

Workshop participants’ reflections reveal how parolees recognize the genre’s construction, as they cite key “buzz words” commissioners need to hear. Many are critical of the arbitrariness of parole decisions. Some say the success of their hearings seemed dependent on which commissioners they saw or the presence of a victim’s family at the hearing. In one case, a workshop participant relayed seeing the signed denial form for another prisoner who had not yet appeared for his hearing. Still, many of the participants take the truthfulness and authenticity of their writing seriously and identify their parole board pieces as deeply meaningful (although not always, as Mo’s story makes clear). Some still show reverence to the parole board; for example, in his reflection for *48<sup>th</sup> St. Anthology*, David (2018) recalls the emotion in hearing he was found suitable as such: “It is because someone believes me and believes in me...That’s as close to love as I have been in 28 years” (6).

These divergent and valid interpretations reflect individualized approaches to the genre, despite rigid conventions. Mo, for instance, demonstrates his intentional and strategic approach in his final and

successful parole hearing through the framing of his materials. In a “Letter of Introduction” to his inch-and-a-half packet of materials, Mo (2018) writes, “Due to a speech impediment developed after devastating experiences during childhood, [...] whenever I am anxious or nervous I have a difficult time verbally expressing myself” (1). Mo relayed to our group his concern that any deviation from expected voice, tone, or body language might be interpreted as “inauthentic.” Thus, he sets up a rhetorical barrier protecting him from such critiques. Citing his prior trauma as the reason why his oral delivery and demeanor might differ from the board’s expectations, Mo makes space for his own speech and positions the board’s potential critique as errant.

In contrast to his clear statement of introduction, Mo invokes intentionally ambiguous phrasing in his Statement of Stipulation. After repenting for “half truths” he told in previous hearings, Mo writes: “I completely agree with the findings in the Probation Officer’s Report, as well as the verdict handed down by the jury; that I murdered Mr. F” (17). Mo communicated to our group that having denied being the shooter in multiple prior hearings, he feared the commissioners could trap him in his Statement of Stipulation. Thus, in the passage above, Mo structures the sentence in such a way that he recognizes the findings of the court as the commissioners insisted in previous hearings, but leaves open for interpretation whether or not he claims responsibility for murdering Mr. F. The clause after the semicolon belongs to the finding and verdict; in one possible reading, then, Mo does not directly confess to the murder, he instead concedes that the findings and verdict conclude that he did. Thus, he creates a space to conform to the board’s expectation but leaves room to revert back to his position in previous hearings if necessary.

Code meshing is another tactic the men employ to meet the board’s expectations and transgress boundaries by simultaneously performing multiple identities (Love 2011, 186). While code meshing often considers the merging of different national languages or dialects and linguistic forms (Anzaldúa 1987; Canagarajah 2006; 2013; Smitherman 1986), we consider Suresh Canagarajah’s “contact zone textualities” more broadly and discuss code meshing as “the blending together of diverse communicative resources in rhetorically

strategic ways” (Roozen 2011, 203) to achieve its purposes. One former lifer in our workshop, Ronnie, exemplifies this strategy in a twenty-page piece for his seventeenth parole hearing in forty-one years. In his first sixteen hearings, Ronnie (originally sentenced seven years-to-life) answered what was asked of him but refused to prepare writing or an oral delivery for the board, explaining that his record (programming, clear psych reports, work history, etc.) spoke for itself. This refusal is a speech act in and of itself—one in which intentional silence rejects avowal. This resistance resulted in decades of incarceration beyond Ronnie’s minimum sentence.

For his seventeenth hearing, Ronnie decided to put his experiences and the injustice of the previous sixteen denials on the record, even if it meant another denial. According to Ronnie, the questions the board asked during his final hearing were “soft balls,” indicating that they had already decided to grant him parole. When asked to speak, he presented each commissioner with his lengthy piece and said, “I plan on reading my version of what has happened to me the past forty years.” Ronnie explained to our group that because he planned to read the piece, he had edits with pen throughout the original copy and strikes through paragraphs he decided not to read. However, the commissioners adjourned temporarily to read the piece, depriving Ronnie of his opportunity to deliver his address orally and allowing commissioners to see the adjustments and deletions. Still, Ronnie recalls that he knew he had to be cautious and not blatantly critique or offend, and this is where the merging of language codes became crucial.

Language that engages the rhetoric of self-help and spirituality is often considered evidence of transformation by commissioners, and the former appears frequently throughout Ronnie’s piece. He titles the piece “My Self-Help Journey of Discovery” (2017) and invokes the term “self-help” sixteen times. He details his role as staff liaison coordinator for a self-help group, summarizes self-help books, and references AA and NA, James Allen, Ken Keys, motivation, and meditation. But even as Ronnie employs this discourse, he pushes on the narrative that credits prison rehabilitation as the nexus of self-help and transformation: “My self-help journey started long before I met any members of the board. It even started before my last full day

of freedom on April XX<sup>th</sup>, 1976” (1). Instead, he credits a friend in jail, JJ, with introducing him to self-help books, courses, and meditation. Ronnie begins with the accepted language of self-help but rejects the role of his forty-year prison term as central to his rehabilitation, demonstrating his strong sense of discursive expectations while implicitly questioning the “the efficacy of incarceration” (Davis 2003, 11).

In retaining his individuality, Ronnie integrates humor, prison lexicon, and computer vocabulary, performing his identity as a jokester, inmate, and a professional. The humor Ronnie integrates depends in part on his delivery, as he expected to read this piece aloud to the board. For instance, he describes looking at JJ’s business proposal: “Perusing the material, I came to the conclusion that this was the most asinine, ridiculous, absurd project ever conceived. After three days with JJ in the cell, the proposal started to sound viable” (2017, 2). While it might not translate in written form, his delivery of these two lines in workshop highlight the juxtaposition and elicit intended laughter. The jokes throughout the piece remind the reader of the writer’s levity, even in the context of incarceration. The writing also immerses the reader in language specific to prison, using acronyms to identify different jails and prisons (HOJJ, TI, CMC-East, FSP) and shorthand to describe prison positions and places (PWC, which stands for Permanent Work Crew, and “Fish Row” Porter), and he refers to his cell as “the house.” Ronnie later integrates computer programming language when describing his work in a unit office at Folsom State Prison: “The machine was an Amstrad-A pre-DOS first generation PC. It’s [sic] locomotion was provided by the J21ACPM3. I recognized the J21A as the guidance system for the first moon landing” (13). In performing multiple codes at once, he refuses a singular identity that can be either dismissed as a criminal not reformed or praised as an entirely new man.

Throughout, Ronnie integrates critiques of prison employees, the transfer systems, and the parole hearings, but couches these critiques within accepted discourses of responsibility and gratitude. For instance, he describes the hypocrisy of a sergeant instructing him to return (and incur the cost of postage) 300 copies of a self-help book he had secured from the author for the men in prison.



He concludes, “Some employees did not like happy inmates” (10). Ronnie was eventually able to donate the books to the chapel but “No one at California Medical Facility ever saw the books again” (2017, 10). Pages later, though, he concedes, “When I was a young man, I didn’t fully appreciate the Department of Corrections’ treatment. Now...I have found a new admiration for the Department” (18). Fully aware that parole depends in part upon legitimizing the system that imprisons, Ronnie expresses insight and gratitude. Three short paragraphs later, though, he invokes legal discourse and calls out the unfairness of being denied parole in his previous appearances for “the Serious Nature of My Commitment Offense”—a reason that no longer sufficed as the sole basis of denial as of 2008 (*re Lawrence and Shaputis*). According to Ronnie, a commissioner in his previous hearing, which took place after the shift in law, instructed Ronnie not to attribute his previous denials to the nature of his originary offense and “admonished” him for challenging the basis of those past decisions. Instead, his document for the present hearing recounts this exchange and suggests that even in that hearing, he believes his originary crime unduly impacted the board’s findings (19). He “talks back” to the system, questioning whether or not they used the proper legal standard in his previous denials. Couched between discourse expressing gratitude and responsibility, this legal critique becomes perhaps more palatable. In the original copy of this piece, Ronnie crossed out this section, intending not to read it into the record, perhaps in fear that this would be seen as “minimizing” or not taking complete responsibility. With the board’s decision to read the original document rather than listen to it, the commissioners encountered this critique.

To temper criticism, Ronnie ends his piece thanking prison staff for their “professional care and genuine humanity” (20) and in a handwritten addition that employs discourse of responsibility and remorse states: “I want you to remember that I acknowledge I was wrong. I accept full responsibility for everything that happened. I am really sorry” (107). Even here, Ronnie’s broad language calls attention to the perfunctory nature of the avowal, for how could he have “full responsibility” over everything that he did not have agency? In strategically meshing the language of self-help, responsibility, and gratitude to illustrate “insight” with discourses of prison, technical writing, and critique, Ronnie imagines an audience beyond the board

and enters into the record an account that disrupts the system's unilateral power.

Such power disruptions also occur within the processes of preparing for the parole board. Kevin, another workshop participant, describes going to his sixth hearing with documents he wrote to prove his responsibility and insight. Despite initial cautious optimism, Kevin received another denial. He describes how the commissioners asked him unfamiliar questions and prompted him to respond to difficult hypotheticals. He stumbled through his responses, answering as honestly as he could, and again, he received a three-year denial. The commissioners cited his lack of understanding and insight, the presence of which Kevin believed was clear in his writing. His state-appointed attorney had advised that he not deliver the writing to the commissioners, explaining that it would be more impactful if he were able to "speak to the issues" without text. He took her advice. After the hearing, his attorney assured him that documents wouldn't have made a difference, as his insight was clear, and that the commissioners had made up their minds (2018, 19-20). Kevin did not internalize the board's denial as legitimate commentary on his character and determined, "they just didn't want to let me go" (2018, 20). Still, Kevin felt hopeless.

Nevertheless, he prioritized social responsibility to his community—an attribute the genre fosters. Most prisoners have their applications rejected at least six times before they are found "suitable" and report identifiable failures to fellow prisoners to help others revise their writing. Kevin (2018) writes: "Even though I had nothing good to share with those on the yard, it was my responsibility to other lifers to talk about how it had gone" (21). In later reflecting on his successful final hearing, Kevin recounts the help that "came from a very unexpected source"—an African American lifer named Sam, who had been found suitable for the second time and was waiting for the completed review process after a previous rejection by the governor (21-22). Kevin writes, "I could write forever and never be able to put into words the emotions that stirred in me from this completely selfless act. That this black man would approach me, a white man, knowing we'd been on opposite sides" (22). Sam read over 100 pages of transcripts from Kevin's past hearings: "He pointed out

flaws in my answers, giving me alternatives to insights...He didn't judge, he gave me encouragement, and in that, strength" (23).

Kevin does not credit the board or their denials for the "new insights" or the revised approach that led to his suitability finding. Rather, he recounts the sense of community and knowledge sharing around parole board hearing preparation itself—a contrast to the way prisoners are "systematically excluded from knowledge that circulates among persons of power" or gain knowledge from an outside teacher or expert (Benedict 2018, 230). However, Kevin demonstrates the value of and access to systems of literacy knowledge circulating between the incarcerated absent outside facilitation, something specific to this genre. In reporting parole board "failures" and working with a fellow prisoner to revise parole board writings or prepared answers, knowledge comes from the prisoners themselves. Drawing on Lee Anne Bell's vision for social justice, Manthripragada (2018) describes one goal of prison education: "[to] help shape the transformation of prison students into both self-determining beings with a sense of their own agency and interdependent beings with a sense of social responsibility" (79). In this sense, then, the communal knowledge exchanged among inmates surrounding parole board writing and performances serves the larger goals of prison education.

With this genre and form of knowledge, it seems expected that those who have become experts through experience and practice will transfer knowledge to those in need, increasing transparency in a Kafkaesque parole system. Whereas we see many examples in which prisons systematically segregate and limit camaraderie, the process for parole board writing and hearing preparation can transcend divisions and prejudices, blur boundaries of authoritative knowledge, and claim agency in the process itself. Kevin, who was released in April of 2017, sends monthly letters to current lifers to encourage and support them through the parole process, extending the sense of community beyond bars.

## TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS: BOARD HEARING PREPARATION

*William M.*

*William took on a more formal role as a parole literacy mentor inside prison for over ten years, feeling obligated as an educator to help prisoners master the dominant scripts of “insight.” His codified strategies leave room for individualized, meaningful writing, thus exemplifying conscious attempts to navigate the fissures within avowal and recognize the system’s coercive construction. For this collection, William synthesized and revised the preparatory materials he taught to prisoners.*

The trepidation in anticipating a board hearing is palpable. Some approach it with ambivalence, expecting a denial, while others suffer many months before the hearing wanting to present the best face possible. They ask those who have been found suitable how their hearings went, trying to capture that “golden ticket” that will guarantee them a positive finding.

As a former educator, I decided to put together a sensible plan of approach. This plan would allow the individual to organize his thoughts into a rapid response. Understanding that there was a distinct difference in ethnicity, age, and level of education, as well as country of origin, I had to devise a digestible, usable method for each individual.

My eight-page summary included an introductory page and the method I would use to elicit relevant underlying subconscious information, long suppressed. This introductory page included the following information: practicing posture and attitude for the board; teaching the individual how to be relaxed but alert during the hearing; teaching how to answer questions without pause; helping in the preparation of the closing statement; and discussing legal rights and objections. I had to confirm confidentiality for each person and most importantly, they had to confirm they were committed to the process.

I also included two pages of questions most frequently asked by the parole commissioners. I had each individual read the questions and then identify the ones that would cause them the most problems

answering, such as: *what is the impact of your crime?* and *when did you fully accept responsibility and what was the process behind this acceptance?*

I would set up a timetable of weekly meetings with the individual no sooner than one-to-two months prior to the hearing. This was to practice answering questions, review precipitating facts causing criminality, and review all submissions to the board. I created different sets of acronyms to help each individual remember key points during their board appearance, such as “R.I.C.E.” to “remember emotions”—Remorse, Insight, Compassion, Empathy. In addition, I wanted to ensure that the information was fresh in their minds. I wanted them to know that each board had different commissioners and deputy commissioners, so what may have worked at one hearing may not work at another.

Finally, I reviewed their past board transcripts to identify their weaknesses.

My objective was to act out a real board hearing and simulate the level of intensity that the individual would be exposed to there. I formalized my presentation and was pointed, sometimes abrasive, when answers did not address the questions.

The most difficult part of the process was going back to early childhood and drawing intimate details of blame. What I mean by that was individuals, many times, were unsuspecting victims of their surroundings, which inculcated criminality as a norm. Anger, tears, frustration, and nerves were frayed at certain points of this exploration of the past. Denial was rampant, and facts had to be slowly culled from the individual.

Over the last ten years of my pre-board preparation, I was successful with most of those who went before the board. I charged nothing, and my reward came from the successful findings of suitability, and on occasion, I received a rice bowl.

## FROM CONFESSION TO FREE EXPRESSION—OR NOT

*Ben Pack*

*Originally, Ben wanted to create a piece mirroring the form of Mo's writing to highlight accidental parallels between the Francisco Homes writing workshop and parole board. It didn't work. So he wrote this instead. The following piece makes visible the power dynamics of the workshop and creation of this collection.*

When writing in any institution, and in prison writing specifically, agency and resistance require mastering languages of power and dominant scripts. The presence of the former prisoners in our workshop suggests that they finally succeeded at adhering to institutional scripts, whether or not they recognized their power, and internalized them, performed them without acceptance, or something in between. Mastering parole board expectations has material consequences—the men go free and can engage in true counternarratives without fear of physical retribution. In workshop, we encounter many interpretations of the parole process, critiques of the penal system, rejection of labels and stigmas, etc. The discussions are often lively, and the men will agree and disagree and adjust, build on, and modify what others say. For these reasons, we decided to ask them more.

For the workshop on November 1, 2018, we ask the men to free-write about their experience preparing for the parole board. In order around the room this day, starting at my left, are Gary, Emily, Stephanie, Emily's student Sean, Mike, Ed, Ronnie, Doc, Dale, Mo, Steve, Stephanie's former student Colin, and then back to me (Ben). Everyone digs into the free-write for twelve minutes, and when the timer chimes, Emily hits record on her phone and people begin to share.

We pay close attention to the men's words—indeed, Stephanie, Emily and I have been waiting for this conversation, planning it with the men, because we think their insight is worth sharing. It is not the insight sought by the parole board though, nor the insight the men have into themselves. It's the sight into a world that remains murky to those of us on the outside.

But as the three of us draw up proposals for publications and presentations and discuss in private, we also think about the fine lines between encouragement and manipulation, between giving voice to the men's experiences and using those experiences for *our* ends, between pointing to a larger truth and recognizing that any such truth is at best a slippery construction.

So in laying several contradictions bare, we hope to think not just about avowal in terms of incarceration and parole, but the many other rhetorical situations in which individual truth is constructed to suit the power exerted from above. The way in which students can be tempted to mold their essays to conform to a teacher's expectation; the way writers (ourselves included) can be tempted to mold their work for publication; and the way that work can change how we think and perceive the very rhetorical situations we're in—what one of the workshop participants deemed “Stockholm syndrome”—even as we accept these conventions, because if we don't, will anyone listen?

In the workshop and in our writing, we have the luxury to experiment, but in the context of writing or preparing spoken answers for the parole board, these tensions between author and audience make it impossible to address unfairness in the system, as doing so appears to minimize personal responsibility—one of the very things that prisoners cannot do if they want to be released. In our classrooms, students can defy us and still get a passing grade; in publishing, the reader has the freedom to set us aside at any time. But in prison there is no choice. The prisoners must confirm the power of the state, even when doing so is otherwise untrue and illogical (such as with Mo)—and they must do so over and over again for as many parole hearings as the board demands. If prisoners refuse to speak or refuse to go before the board, they may demonstrate resistance and reclaim agency—but ironically, they still affirm the power above them by accepting their fate in prison. Despite spending hours upon hours honing their files, prisoners may be called upon at any time to “speak to the issues” without the text they prepared.

In these regards, the parole hearings are not really about “hearing,” but about ritualized performance—one so well practiced, it can be difficult to break even after parole is granted. Many residents bring

sections of what they wrote for the parole board to the Francisco Homes writing workshop—and while the authors share and everyone discusses how to revise the pieces for a new outside audience, they have rarely, if ever, been changed significantly; nevertheless, some men will return and re-read the same sections at another session, the only difference being that they read more than the previous time. However, this stubbornness does not extend to their other work, which is often revised heavily, even when highly personal. It's an unsettling thought but for all well-intentioned efforts, perhaps Emily, Stephanie and I resemble (at least initially) another kind of board granting approval and admittance—the three of us sitting around a table not unlike the one Mo describes for his hearing.

Unlike the commissioners though, we are inclined to push back and question the participants' writing that we feel falls into a transformation or conversion narrative—narratives that we do not ascribe to given the material and social realities surrounding the penal justice system. At the same time, we are sharp to the risks of coercion. Whatever the men say, we want to resist altering it, and we don't want to turn them into objects of study, but let them and their words stand. And yet we are still architects, planning our readers' first impression and the last; where cuts are necessary for length and expansion is necessary for comprehension. We work to create a polished product, but one that does not obscure the labor, materials, and people. So, we remind ourselves that the men's experiences and reflections will not and need not conform to our expectations to be valid, heard, or seen, lest they become overworked into a new set of performances. Rather, we record and let the men speak for themselves.

Therefore, a series of comments are offered below. Some have been selected with the purpose of discovering new information and new paths of inquiry. Others are here to more firmly establish the validity of the ideas we have already proposed. And still, others question the validity of our conclusions herein. Rather than reconcile these contradictions, we lay a few of these blocks here, open for construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.



**Stephanie:** Can you tell from how long the [parole board's] deliberation period is whether or not you're going to be successful?

**Steve:** No. There was a guy in my building who went Tuesday and got found suitable. And he said when he came back in from the deliberation he saw a cup of water and a roll of toilet paper sitting by his seat. So he knew he was going to be found suitable.

**Stephanie:** Why?

**Steve:** Just—he was going to cry. So when I walk back in I seen the same thing.

**William:** When you're faced with a fifteen-year, or a ten-year, or seven-year, or five-year denial, there's no light at the end of the tunnel. And so the inclination is to say to yourself "Maybe it's not all worthwhile." And that's the experience that I had with the intensity [...]. They finally took 'em, I think about three/ four years ago they finally started having these psychological examinations—but this is two weeks *after* the board. And by then you've already gone to the yard, and you've been hugged by your buddy and you're back to your old schedule and it's like: "thank God this is over with. I don't care if they found me suitable or not. I just want to get back to my normal life." And the normal life is prison.

**Mike:** The transcripts of my hearing were important resources preparing for my last hearing.... Before the final hearing I was in a locked-down medical area. I had my property, my transcripts, and my notes from my prior official hearings. After reading all the material carefully, I began to understand the commissioners' mentality and their apprehensiveness about giving me the opportunity to become a free citizen again. Understanding their mentality allowed me to see them as risk-averse civic functionaries. I was able to appeal to the partial certainty that they had in me as a result of constant past behavior.

**Gary:** Man, the first time I went to the board I literally had three little minor strokes. I was so stressed out. I had never been before. I was really under a great deal of stress. But the second time I went, I was just: “I’m going to tell you the truth,” and it turned out that’s what they wanted to hear. That’s exactly what they want to hear is the truth. *What made you a criminal? How come you became a criminal? Do you recognize how different your criminal behavior was from a regular human being? And what have you done to change your warped belief system and become that human being again?* And I presented that to them. And when they came out after the deliberation the cop rolls me back (I was in a wheelchair at that time) and he rolls me back and I say, “Well, how do you think I did?” and he said, “Well... I dunno. You know at first I thought it was going to be a three-year denial and then you kept talking, and you kept talking, *and you kept talking*, and *you kept TALKING!* And I think you talked your way out of prison.”

Dale speaks up and asks if the group wants to hear something different, but he’s unintentionally passed over, and Mo begins to speak instead.

**Mo:** For ten years I refused to go before the board during and after Grey Davis’s tenure as governor. He made a declaration that...anyone in prison for murder would be forever behind bars. This statement gave rise to some inmates serving life terms for murder to opt out of programs designed to resurrect character by way of self-discovery.... I just finally came to terms—*well, do you want your kids and your grandkids—if you leave this world, is this the legacy you want to leave behind?* So, I said no! You know, hey—I had to show them there’s more to life, even when you have nothing.... If I was going to be in prison the rest of my life, I was going to be the same person I am right now. You know, same person. Courteous, polite, kind, generous, and understanding. I’m going to be that same person.

And when we circle back to Dale and ask him to share, he refuses. Then a couple minutes later, he leaves the group and does not return.

**Ronnie:** So, what I've noticed about everyone's experience is that they are all different. No two people who went before the parole board ever had the same experience. They're all different. And it's because we have different people on the parole board, and we're different. So, I don't find any continuity in there at all.

**Stephanie:** That's a mic drop.

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## **Mo**

The second of four children, I was born in Miami Florida with the help of a midwife during the time of segregation. My mother was born in 1918 and continues amongst the living, and is a month away from her 101st birthday. As a child, I grew up in an environment where Jesus Christ reigned supreme. I remember wanting the opportunity to see a movie without sitting up in the peanut gallery, the only area in the theater colored people were allowed to sit. As I got older and began to experience other forms of discrimination, my thoughts of “WHY am I subjected to this” began to take shape. I desired at this stage of my life (early teens) was what it would take for people to treat each other with respect, and like human beings.

Immature and gullible, I never thought in terms of social/political movements and their necessity in bringing about social change. Entering prison at some point in life sure as hell wasn't a thought or for that matter, an afterthought. One year after release from prison, I speak of freedom and what it means to me. I refer to freedom as being something psychological rather than strictly physical. Today I work at the Veterans Affairs Office during the day, attend community college at night, maintain sobriety by attending self-help groups and hold down a part time job during weekends.

## **Stephanie Bower**

For the last twenty-five years, I've taught writing and literature at different institutions in Southern California. For the last ten, I've also taught a community-engagement course at the University of Southern California. This course led me to the Francisco Homes, and the partnership that has been a tremendous inspiration and joy for me and my students. I'm very grateful to have such wonderful collaborators in the writing workshop we run once a week and in this article.

## **Raymond P.**

I was born in Chicago and grew up in San Diego. My mother died young and I spun out of control. I went to prison and was forced to learn to control my feelings or suffer more consequences. I eventually cut the gang ties and explored my own creativity. I went to work on

a degree, learned to draw and started making amends for my choices. I've been working on myself and am a work in progress like everyone else. I live a productive life and work a lot now. I maintain healthy relationships and contribute to the community. I'm blessed.

**Emily Artiano**

I am an Assistant Professor (Teaching) in the Writing Program at the University of Southern California. My research interests include the intersections of early American literature and rhetoric and composition theories of translanguaging as well as community engagement and pedagogy. Over my past four years at USC, I have been teaching writing courses with community partnerships and have become involved with several non-profit organizations focused on social progress including 826LA, Miracle Messages, and the Francisco Homes—transitional homes in Los Angeles for formerly incarcerated “lifers.” The weekly writing workshop I co-facilitate at the Francisco Homes has impacted my students and me in wonderful ways and led to my current research on prison literacies. I have published work in *Symbiosis - A Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Relations* and presented at several national conferences.

**William M.**

I was born in San Francisco in 1939 and returned to China in 1940. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 and entered Shanghai the next day. I spent 3-½ years in a concentration camp. I then went to Hong King and lived there until 1954. I had PTSD and attention deficit disorder. I was a poor student because I couldn't concentrate. We then went to England and I lived in London for a year. My father got a job as an engineer in Canada. I was sent to San Francisco to live with my aunt to go to high school. I did okay in school but was a little above average student. I then went through 16 years of study in medicine, education, and psychology. My personal image was poor and I tried to compensate through study and self-development. I practiced medicine for 35 years, and was a medical educator. I have 8 children, 15 grandchildren, and 3 great grandchildren, my pride. What more can a man say?

**Ben Pack**

I began teaching in the University of Southern California Writing Program as a Master of Professional Writing graduate student in 2010, later becoming a Lecturer and Assistant Professor (Teaching). Along with Emily and Stephanie, I have co-led a creative workshop at the Francisco Homes for the past three years; my community engagement work also involves partnerships with Miracle Messages and 826LA. My creative work has appeared in literary publications such as *Catamaran* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

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# **Critical Collaborations**



# Citizen Cuffed:

## An American Carceral Experience

Melissa McKee

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*Think about your reading life. What piece of writing has “taken the top of your head off,” to use Emily Dickenson’s phrase? Write a reading narrative in which you enter into dialogue with this writing—feel free to quote it. How has this reading experience changed you and helped you to redefine your life and your mission as a writer?*

Odd how a thing can exist long before there is language to name it. Though I had spent years subject to the whims of the Department of Corrections, the word “microaggression” had not entered my vocabulary. Each day I faced an existence wherein I was undoubtedly “other.” Each day I was reminded of my failings. These reminders were present in what I wore, in what I ate, in where I slept, in how and when I moved. These reminders were present in my body as much as my mind.

I am a white woman. As such, I have walked through the world paying little attention to the color of my skin. That is white privilege.

“White privilege” is another term that had little place in my vocabulary—at least until I collided with *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. Suddenly, I knew from my experience within the criminal justice system what it felt like to be both hypervisible and invisible at the same time—an experience Rankine captured in the pages of this book that would change my perspective of the world and my place in it.

“Yes, and...” writes Rankine, again and again. I agreed with Rankine that “yes, and attested to a life with no turn-offs, no alternative routes.” I had driven myself crazy for years searching my memory for a turn-off that I might have missed. One night I had been driving in the rain, certain that I should take a left, but unable to stop myself from taking the right—into the arms of the lover who would give me scars that no amount of time would erase. Was the left turn an illusion? Did it ever exist at all?

I went to prison pregnant. I gave birth to a daughter in custody. I spent one night cradling her in my arms after I had unwillingly pushed her from my body. The next day I was unchained from the hospital bed. My child was placed in the clear plastic bassinet next to the bed I had vacated. Chains were wrapped first around my empty womb, then my wrists were secured to these same chains. I was led from the room, where my child remained. I looked over my shoulder as long as I could, unwilling to turn away from my daughter, trusting that the hands on each of my shoulders would not run me into a wall—not for my sake, but their own, you know. After turning the corner, I could no longer see her. Nor could I see anything else, not for the tears that were falling, but for the sheer weight of the pain and regret that pressed down upon me.

*Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight.* I was obese the first five years of my incarceration. My body retained the shape of my pregnancy. I carried my grief in the shape of a phantom fetus. For years, new women at the prison would smile kindly at me and ask when I was due. Actual insult to actual injury.

The loss of this child compounded all the other losses—all of which were “locked in and coded on a cellular level.” I suffer from chronic back pain now. Surely the result of the weight of sorrow my body has been made to drag from there to here.

*You are not sick, you are injured—  
you ache for the rest of your life.  
How to care for the injured body,  
the kind of body that can't hold  
the content it is living.*

*Citizen* is not about me, and yet, I find myself within its pages. My injury and Rankine’s are not the same. Though my position as an “American Citizen” and all that phrase implies, in terms of responsibilities and protections to and from the United States, are, indeed, threatened—those threats do not arise out from the pigment of my skin. Mine is a different injury than that of Rankine and other Black Americans. However, this injury is one which allows me to glimpse, however slightly, the injury that has been done to my countrymen.

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# Contemplative Methods for Prison-University Writing Partnerships: Building Sangha Through “The Om Exchange”

**Sarah Moseley**

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*Community writing partnerships between university and incarcerated students typically focus on developing critical reading and writing skills through shared assignments, peer review exchanges, and group discussion. This article examines a prison-university writing partnership between two semester-long yoga classes, one at a maximum-security women’s prison and one at a competitive university, that privileges building community over building academic skills. The yoga students shared reflective writing on yoga-related topics – from philosophy, to tips and modifications for poses, to personal experience – in a monthly newsletter called “The Om Exchange.” The sound of “om” in yoga symbolizes the universal “oneness” of all living beings. The purpose of the newsletter was two-fold: to support reflective writing for deeper engagement with class material and to connect with the larger yoga community beyond classroom walls.*

*While the yoga students only met in person once, the newsletter enabled them to build a sangha, or a local community with shared values that offers members motivation, guidance, support, and accountability in practicing those values. I suggest that the intersections between contemplative practice and feminist rhetorical listening facilitated these students, who may appear distinct, in finding “oneness” with each other; with*

*its focus on building community, this writing project affords visibility to the power of forming partnerships around explicit shared values through the lens of sangha, and offers transferable methods for more conventional community literacy projects. A contemplative approach fosters social and emotional learning, including civic and democratic values, that bridges institutions, cultures, and differences for a more equitable society. As one incarcerated yoga student reflected: “If what we do for the good inside these walls doesn’t reach beyond these walls, then what’s the point – [this partnership] is the point and a start.”*

Read more at [https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/19Sp\\_KINE\\_1410-1\\_Yoga/](https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/19Sp_KINE_1410-1_Yoga/)

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The sound of “om” in yoga symbolizes a universal “oneness” with all living beings. The “om” should be made loud enough to create a physical vibration in the body, as if every cell is vibrating at the same frequency of the universe; the pitch or quality or harmony of the sound is irrelevant. Yoga is the practice of yoking the mind to the body, the self to the community. A yoga class often ends with a spoken namaste: I see and recognize myself in you. As one of my incarcerated yoga students, E.H., said: this closing “creates a feeling of unity across each person’s different dynamics. It is spiritually awakening.” Another incarcerated yoga student, J.E., wrote: “The best feeling comes at the end of class. The resounding positive energy touches the hearts of all.”

The unity across difference and the shared sense of positive energy are at the heart of this writing partnership between incarcerated and university yoga students, or “yogis,” highlighting the intersections between contemplative practice and rhetorical listening as the yogis created a yoga community, or sangha. The value of rhetorical listening in building and maintaining collaborative community writing relationships is well established. Rhetorical listening is defined by Krista Ratcliffe (2005) as “a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly a code of cross-cultural conduct,” which “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (17). A relationship built on rhetorical listening should exhibit the curiosity and cooperation recommended by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) as a community builds knowledge together, including a suspension of judgment “to resist coming to closure too soon” at the expense of “creativity, wonder, and inspiration” (85). Such an approach to community writing is widely embraced, but methodological

questions still abound for developing and enacting rhetorical listening in university partnerships with incarcerated people: how do we listen to each other? As research on this question increases (see Karen Rowan and Alexandra J. Cavallaro's 2018 article), I suggest looking to contemplative practice for academic collaborations involving carceral spaces, where concepts such as oneness and community are founded on non-judgement and inclusivity through contemplative "deep listening" that echoes and expands rhetorical listening by first "listening" to oneself.

This article demonstrates the potential of a contemplative approach for prison-university writing partnerships by examining the formation of a yoga community in fall 2018 through five editions of a monthly joint newsletter between yogis at WCC, a Virginia state maximum security "women's correctional center," and UVA, the University of Virginia—only 15 miles apart. The groups came together in this way to practice oneness by writing short reflective pieces on class material, including yoga philosophy, history, poses, and personal experience. The two groups consisted of 16 incarcerated yoga students at WCC in a 200-hour Registered Yoga Teacher Training (RYTT)—who were all women from a variety of places and backgrounds, with months to decades of yoga experience, aged 27 to 74—and 25 university yoga students in a semester-long 1-credit hour Introduction to Yoga course—who were mostly women, from Virginia, academically high-achieving, aged 18 to 22. Both groups were in "closed" classes, with fixed rosters and required attendance for the duration of each course; I was the instructor for both groups. Acknowledging the emphasis on oneness, the joint newsletter was called "The Om Exchange." All of the yogi voices in this article are excerpted from the newsletter.

## **THE PARTNERSHIP**

The primary emphasis on "community" in this community literacy project affords visibility to the powerful integration of contemplative practice with community writing and rhetoric, while also presenting transferable methods for more conventional community literacy projects with explicit writing instruction or goals. In contemplative traditions, the community of practitioners is called a sangha and offers motivation, guidance, support, and accountability; the sangha is an opportunity to practice oneness with all living beings by starting with those nearby. Writing for the newsletter facilitated building a sangha across barriers



of distance and access, exploring the class material, and engaging in introspection or “study of self,” known as *svadhyaya* in contemplative practice. Reflective writing enabled all of the yoga students to deepen their connections with each other, the material, and their own selves; the newsletter was a place for the yogis to develop social and civic identities, as well as navigate their relational roles: the WCC yogis were finding their voices as new yoga teachers, while the UVA yogis were beginning to see themselves as serious yoga students. The monthly newsletter was the only communication the WCC and UVA yogis had with each other until December 2018, when the UVA yogis visited WCC for in-person introductions, newsletter discussion, and a joint yoga practice; this was the first university course partnership with a WCC program, the first class trip to WCC for a community-building purpose, and the first time “insiders” and “outsiders” practiced yoga together in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The strength of this sangha built primarily through a newsletter highlights the potential of contemplative methods when integrated with rhetorical listening and reflective writing. Reflective writing in incarcerated populations has been found to be an effective method for bridging past and future selves that is linked to reduced recidivism through identity negotiation and transformation (Stevens 2012, 15). Additionally, for inmates serving long sentences, letters and other communications from the public create “growing feelings of engagement with ‘the outside world’ and acceptance by ‘normal people’” (Hodgson & Horne 2015, 10). A sangha of incarcerated and non-incarcerated members reduces inmate social isolation and creates empowering social networks (Draine, McTighe, & Bourgois 2011; Kaskutas, Bond, & Humphreys 2002; Hick & Furlotte 2010). Much has been written elsewhere on the benefits for university students of reflective writing and participating in community literacy prison writing projects, including developing critical thinking skills, challenging stereotypes, reducing prejudice and punitive attitudes, and increasing community connection, empathy, and a drive for social change (Long & Barnes 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Pollack 2016; Hilinski-Rosick & Blackmer 2014). Specifically, reflective writing on community partnerships provides university students a way to construct meaning of their experience as they recognize tensions and reconsider civic, political, and community identities (Mitchell 2014; Jones & Abes 2004; Jones & Hill 2003). The writing exchange facilitated identity negotiation for all yogis, as they developed their teacher and student

roles and as they reconceived connections and responsibilities to each other. The reciprocal and mutually beneficial nature of this community partnership was key to its ethical foundation as well as the trust and participation in the sangha.

Through reflective writing, in which yogis progressively embodied their respective identities of teachers and students, and careful reading, in which yogis practiced rhetorical listening through an openness to each other's experiences, a sangha characterized by the personal growth of svadhyaya emerged. UVA yogi S.J.S. decided to continue a personal yoga practice after the semester's end, reflective of the role of serious yoga student, because after "reading about the experiences of a WCC yogi who had gained the level of comfort to practice on her own, he was more able to see, and more motivated to pursue the benefits of practicing by himself." The relationship also gave WCC yogis an opportunity to rehearse their teacher identities, to write and speak with confidence. WCC yogi N.J. wrote in the final newsletter that "just recently she had realized her self-worth and potential through Yoga Teacher Training" and that the newsletter helped her with "building trust in herself" as she experienced how others trusted her by closely reading and "listening" to her words.

The UVA visit to WCC affirmed and strengthened the sangha. Echoing the beneficial outcomes of university-prison writing partnerships outlined above, both groups of yogis overcame stereotypes and prejudices while building community and understanding in the spirit of yogic oneness. From submissions for the final newsletter, a UVA yogi reflected on the visit to WCC that "there are very few places where he could go to merely be in a group of people so different from himself, let alone be accepted as one of the group." Another UVA yogi wrote that "This experience continues to provide a deeper perspective on how similar we all are." The UVA yogis found acceptance, community, and similarities, and so did the WCC yogis; just as the UVA yogis had preconceived notions challenged, the WCC yogis came to see the UVA student experience in greater complexity. A WCC yogi reflected: "Quite revealing, came the understanding that whether one is incarcerated or not, we each suffer insecurities, we each have attachment issues, we each try to avoid dealing with something: the practice of yoga purifies these obstacles for everyone." Both groups of yogis were affected by the

realization that insecurities, attachment issues, and many more obstacles are universal. Using contemplative methods of *svadhyaya* and “deep listening,” informed by reflective writing and rhetorical listening, the sangha found oneness.

## **THE METHOD**

The WCC-UVA sangha was formed from established models of writing exchange programs between incarcerated and university students, such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Prison Creative Arts Project, the Speak Out! Program, and Exchange for Change program (with the limitation that the yogis communicated solely through writing leading up to a single UVA class trip to WCC in mid-December). These collaborations create opportunity for promoting writing by incarcerated people to outside audiences, breaking down stereotypes about incarcerated people, and building connection and community around shared work. In theorizing the impact of the Exchange for Change program, Wendy Wolters Hinshaw (2018) builds on Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, contending that the Exchange for Change program creates a community where everyone is heard by asking the incarcerated and university students to consciously assume an open stance towards others for cross-cultural exchange to communicate across difference (56). For the yoga exchange, I integrated rhetorical listening with contemplative “deep listening” to develop a contemplative method for a university-prison writing partnership.

Deep listening in contemplative practice is similar to rhetorical listening, requiring the listener take an active role by being fully focused on listening without judgement, without attempting to control the conversation, and without planning a response; “we let go of our inner clamoring and our usual assumptions and listen with respect for precisely what is being said,” according to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (“Deep Listening” 2015). Deep listening is a type of mindfulness, or “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, 8). Contemplative practices such as deep listening and mindfulness are increasingly accepted in the university writing classroom: the approach helps students connect to their purpose and audience (Frey 2017-18); increases awareness of diverse lived experience, consciousness of bias, and feelings of belonging in the classroom (Wray 2018); and creates an embodied ethos of presence that

also promotes physical and emotional well-being (Wenger 2016). Gesa Kirsch (2009) has argued that contemplative practices “can enhance creativity, listening, and expression of meaning” that “enable rhetorical agency” in students and meet key goals of writing curriculum (W2).

Incarcerated populations receive the same benefits of awareness, community, well-being, and agency from contemplative practices as university students; as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness programs become more common and more researched in correctional settings, contemplative practices are also found to improve stress, aggression, attention, and impulse-control in inmates, all factors that support rehabilitation, addiction recovery, and reduced recidivism rates (Lyons & Cantrell 2015; Muirhead & Fortune 2016; Kerekes, Fielding, & Apelqvist 2017). Contemplative practices prime students for the deep rhetorical listening that community partnerships require. By December, the yogis had found unexpected similarities with each other and had also developed an appreciation for their differences. The yogis wrote about this in the newsletter, and it was also reflected in their physical practice of yoga. Yogi M.S. wrote that “at first, when in a pose, she would find herself looking around the room, getting a tinge of satisfaction if she was able to do the pose ‘better.’ This idea disappeared sometime along the way, replaced by a newfound appreciation for how different bodies are.” Another yogi, K.L., explained that “class is a judgement free zone where everyone understands that everyone’s body is different. It is not a place to look at others and judge. In this type of environment, it feels safe to learn new poses.” Yoga lessons on the mat transferred off of the mat, and vice versa. The yogis learned about avoiding comparison and judgement of self and others through explicit instruction in deep rhetorical listening and contemplative values, and with time it became part of their practice on the mat, a tension they navigated in their reflective writing and a value in the sangha.

One of the most foundational methods that contemplative practice offers for listening to others seems counterintuitive: starting with attention on, or “listening to,” one’s self. In the WCC-UVA sangha, reflective writing was an avenue for listening to the self for svadhyaya. Yogis discussed their ideas and reflections in small groups in their own classes with a chance to revise before submitting to the monthly newsletter, as another chance to deepen and articulate their thoughts before sharing their reflective

writing more widely. In addition to reflective writing, students practiced listening to the self through loving-kindness or metta meditation, which begins with directing loving-kindness towards oneself before moving outward to a loved one, a friend, a neutral person, a disliked person, and eventually all living beings. Renowned U.S. meditation expert Sharon Salzberg (1995) explains that offering love to oneself “is the essential foundation for being able to offer genuine love to others” because when people recognize their own desire for happiness, they “see that all beings want to be happy, and that this impulse unites them” as they identify the shared desire (44). Practicing metta cultivates openness, awareness, and love by acknowledging shared humanity, but it must start with the self. The words for the meditation are simple, usually similar to “May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.” These phrases are repeated and altered as the recipient of the intention changes, switching the pronoun or substituting a proper name.

Starting with the self also gives an opportunity for grounding, to realize and remember one’s own positionality and situated-ness in the world before reaching out to others: an individual’s requirements to achieve happiness, wellness, safety, peace, and ease are unique, intrinsically linked with particular identities and life conditions. I agree with Jenn Fishman and Lauren Rosenberg’s (2018) vision of deep rhetorical listening in a community partnership as feminist praxis that “arises from the recognition that no one is ever outside of their communities” and therefore people must be “heedful of dynamics of identity that feminists teach must always be part of their considerations in their every day lives, social interaction, and cultural commitments” (3). People must know where they are standing before taking a step towards or into a new partnership; people must be aware of their own identity dynamics to assume an opening stance of listening to others.

The yogis found the self to be an effective starting point in building community, particularly for showing compassion. Yogi C.M. succinctly summarizes that “Good interactions with others and with the world around her originate from good interactions with herself. Using yoga as a time for self-care allowed her to have more compassion towards herself and others.” Compassion proved to be a powerful lens for navigating personal identity and building a diverse sangha, through the combination of reflective writing and deep rhetorical listening in the

newsletter. Yogi L.A. found compassion, identification, and connection through contemplative practice and philosophy “through which one feels compassion for others and self, as well as feeling connected – compassion creates an ability to identify with others.”

Contemplative traditions begin with cultivating an awareness of self, and then from this ability to “listen” to the self, a person can learn to “listen” to others—to develop compassion for the self, then for others, as the yogis explained above. Larry Yang (2002), a psychotherapist and meditation teacher who specializes in diversity practices, emphasizes that pain and oppression “separate people from each other—in ways that harm the quality of life of all beings” (225). To build community across difference is the practice of diversity, an “incremental and cumulative process” (Yang 2002, 225). Yang ends his metta meditation with a dedication, which includes “May the awareness of the needs of diverse communities continue to be recognized and to grow in all Sanghas” (Yang 2002, 281). The yoga classes aspired to build community in an incremental way, starting with showing compassion to the self, then expanding out, similar to the metta meditation: beginning with the self, then local classmates, eventually to form a sangha of WCC and UVA yogis.

## **THE CHALLENGES**

The bonds forged with local classmates were a strength of the sangha (within each institution, yogis met regularly) but the limitations to everyone coming together weekly were a challenge. WCC yogis embraced their local sangha, growing in diversity practices and deep rhetorical listening skills over time. The WCC local sangha has continued to grow and expand, carving out an “insulated” space from dominant prison culture and power dynamics (Werts 2013); in their sangha, the WCC yogis are building a unique social identity that counters mainstream prison culture in its members’ display of respect, compassion, and integrity, which is an act of power in itself (Laclau 1990, 33; Hall 2000, 18). The WCC sangha and prison administration are now exploring the possibility of a sangha residential wing at WCC, where 65 sangha members could live together, instead of dispersed throughout the dormitories, and set some norms and responsibilities for themselves.

The stability and longevity of the WCC local sangha facilitated the formation of a WCC-UVA sangha: the successful creation of a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha writing partnership in the 15 weeks of the UVA semester can be attributed to this foundation, coupled with the contemplative approach. The UVA yogis, in contrast to WCC, came together as a class for just the semester; this limited the relationship-building among the UVA students and between UVA and WCC yogis. Our success in creating a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha writing partnership in 15 weeks can be attributed to contemplative methods and to the stability of the WCC sangha. As teachers-in-training, the WCC yogis were prepared to expand metta beyond self and demonstrate oneness to the UVA yogis, though this also involved emotional labor from the WCC yogis in terms of hospitality and relationship-building with UVA yogis who were entering into the community for only a semester. While the UVA yogis were invested and dedicated during that time, the WCC yogis were creating a sangha meant to last decades.

The WCC yogis also faced challenges to access and inclusion that the UVA yogis did not: the WCC yogis were nervous that their newsletter submissions were handwritten instead of typed, which meant no auto-correct or spellcheck and more difficulty in revising. It was important to the WCC yogis that their submissions were read and “heard,” but space, cost, and WCC printing constraints meant that not every submission could be included in each printed edition and the digital appendix of all entries was nearly inaccessible to the WCC yogis. While I was careful to balance the number of entries from WCC and UVA in each print edition, and to include everyone in print across the five editions, at one point a WCC yogi expressed concern to me that she was not “good enough” because she was not featured within the first two print editions.

In spring 2019, the WCC-UVA community writing partnership continued to evolve and grow, and I addressed some of these challenges with increased institutional support and grant funding. This semester, the WCC and UVA yogis wrote their “Yoga Stories”—to reflect on and share why they practice yoga—which research assistants edited, spell-checked, coded for keywords, and compiled on a website and in an indexed booklet organized by keywords. The website and booklet serve to lighten the emotional load of the WCC yogis by offering written self-



introductions that can be read by future UVA students, and to represent our findings in print and online, improving accessibility.

## **THE TAKEAWAYS**

The newsletter and resulting sangha formed a deeply transformative experience for the yogis: the contemplative approach to building the sangha, working from self outwards as in the metta meditation, grounded the yogis and prepared everyone for deep rhetorical listening. UVA yogis were inspired by the WCC yoga teachers-in-training, who offered wise advice and modeled yogic behavior; WCC yogis found their teacher voices and confidence, encouraged by the trust of the UVA yogis. The unique circumstances of this partnership afford visibility to contemplative methods in community projects, given its focus on oneness; these methods could be integrated into a more standard university class, prison writing project, or community literacy effort with the same benefits, following a broader trend in higher education of uniting mindfulness and learning.

The parallels between rhetorical and contemplative methods for community building are rich, from rhetorical listening and deep listening, to reflective writing and *svadhyaya*. Beyond these parallels, a contemplative approach adds another layer to community writing partnerships; emphasizing the community aspect changes the nature of the relationship in a fundamental way. The concept of sangha in particular motivates community formation across institutions and differences to create a more equitable society. Sangha members learn and cultivate pro-social behaviors that contribute to the educational, civic, and democratic values that so many university community literacy projects desire to foster. A community project may teach social and emotional learning (SEL) by emphasizing sangha to develop both cognitive skills, such as literacy, as well as non-cognitive skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Over the past 20 years, these non-cognitive skills have been increasingly tied to social, academic, and economic success, as well as overall well-being (Elias et al. 2015; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). SEL, pro-social behavior, and sangha are intricately linked and mutually reinforcing. The WCC-UVA sangha is a starting point for exploring contemplative methods for university community partnerships and theorizing the impact of sangha.



The Om Exchange newsletter was also a starting point for a continually evolving relationship between WCC and UVA yogis. Contemplative methods may require additional time and reflection for relationship-building, but the outcomes are rewarding. The process-oriented approach facilitates the instructor's ability to listen to the community in order to adapt the project, situate the participants, and address concerns. My work setting up a cross-cultural, cross-institutional sangha between WCC and UVA yogis continues, as I reflect on these takeaways and adjust the projects to be more accessible, inclusive, and equitable. Both groups want to the work to continue. A WCC yogi commented that both groups of yogis "were profoundly affected by the words of each other. The project expanded both groups' sense of 'oneness' with the larger community." After the UVA visit, WCC yogi L.E.S. reflected: "If what we do for the good inside these walls doesn't reach beyond these walls, then what's the point – tonight was the point and a start." Deep rhetorical listening across difference to build community through sangha and svadhyaya reflective writing—that is the point, and we have only just begun.

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# Our Amalgamated Voices Speak: Graduate Students and Incarcerated Writers Collaborate for a Common Purpose

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**Kathryn Perry  
& Bidhan Roy**

*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.*

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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

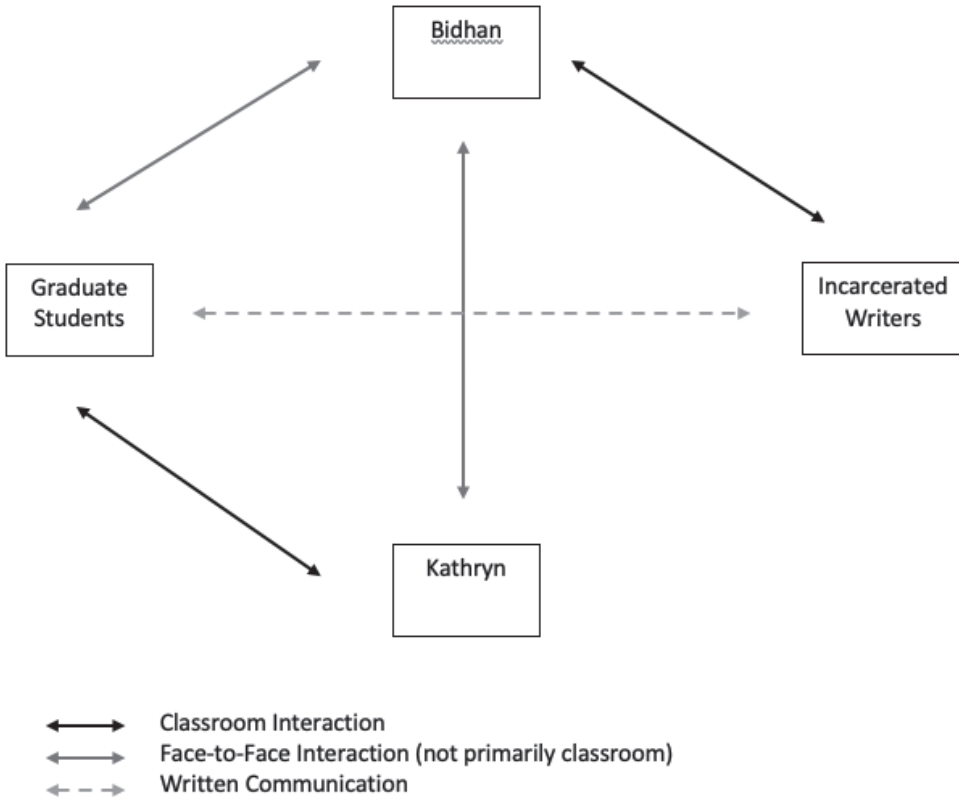


Figure 1

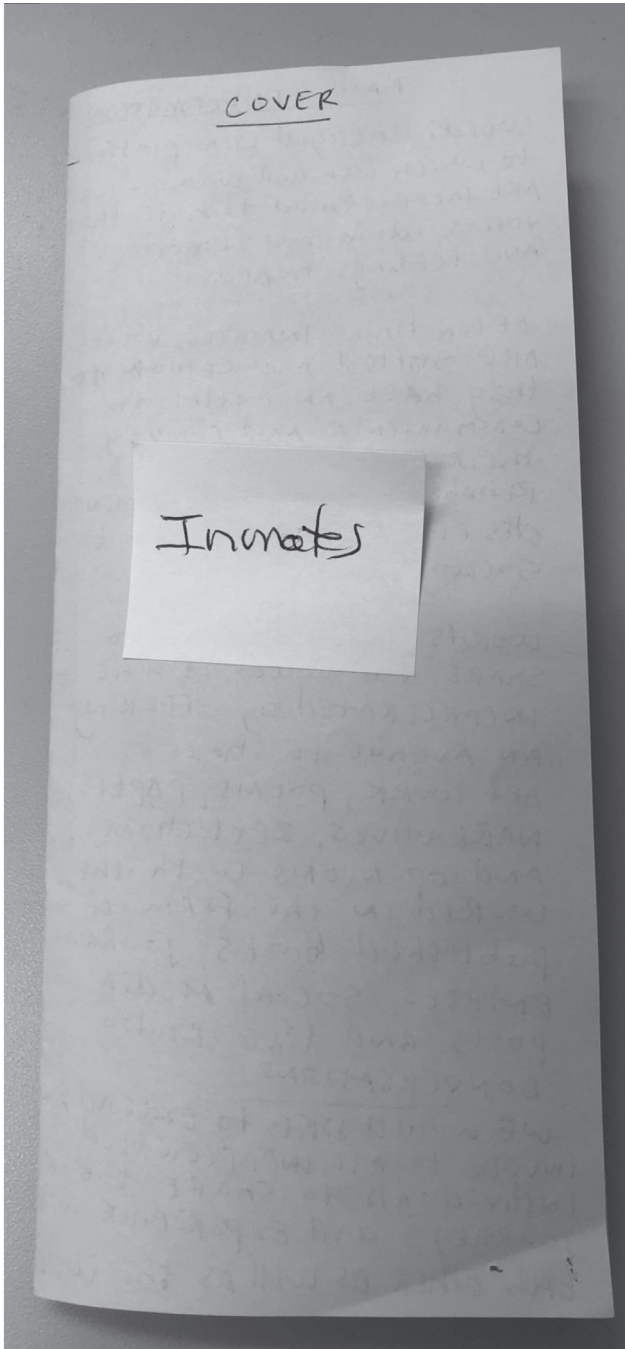


Figure 2-1

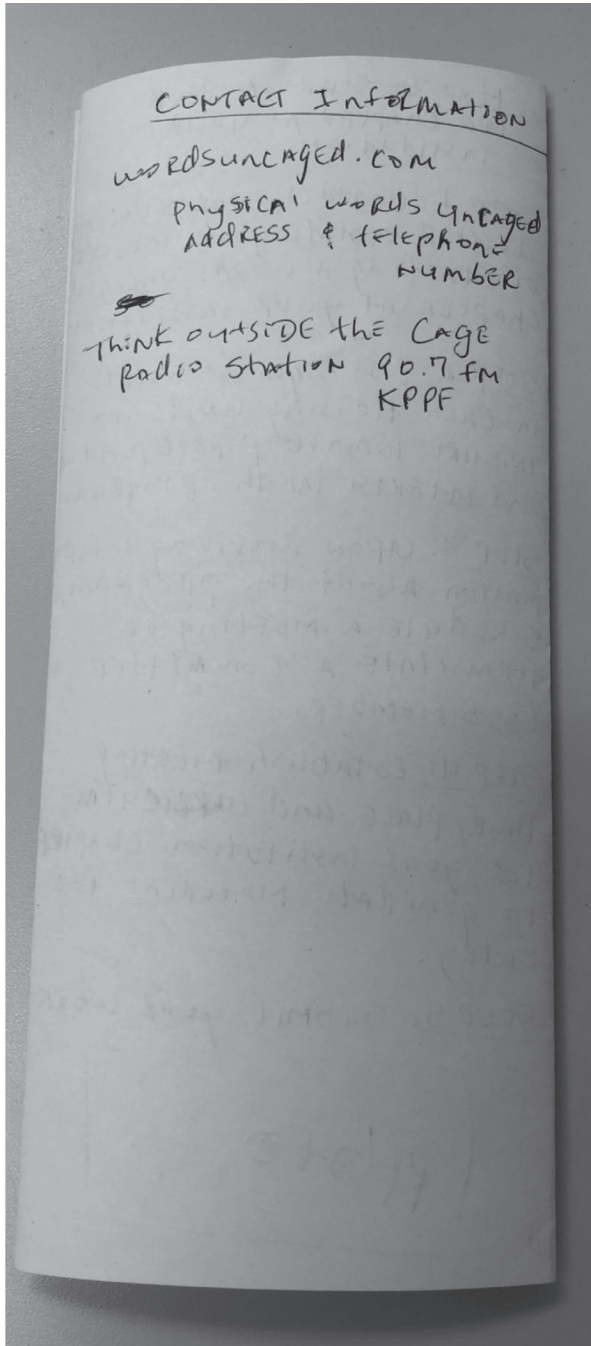


Figure 2-2



BASIC INFORMATION

WORDS UNCEYED 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 STIFLED AND SELDOM DO THEY HAVE AN OUTLET TO COMMUNICATE AND CONVEY THEIR TRANSFORMATIONS, REHABILITATION AND IMMENSE DESIRE TO MAKE AMENDS TO SOCIETY

WORDS UNCEYED 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 UNCEYED DIRECTOR & STATE YOUR INTEREST OF STARTING A WORDS UNCEYED 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

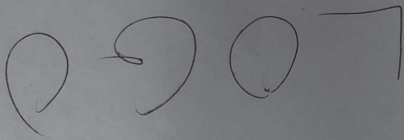
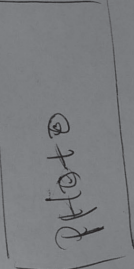


Figure 2-3



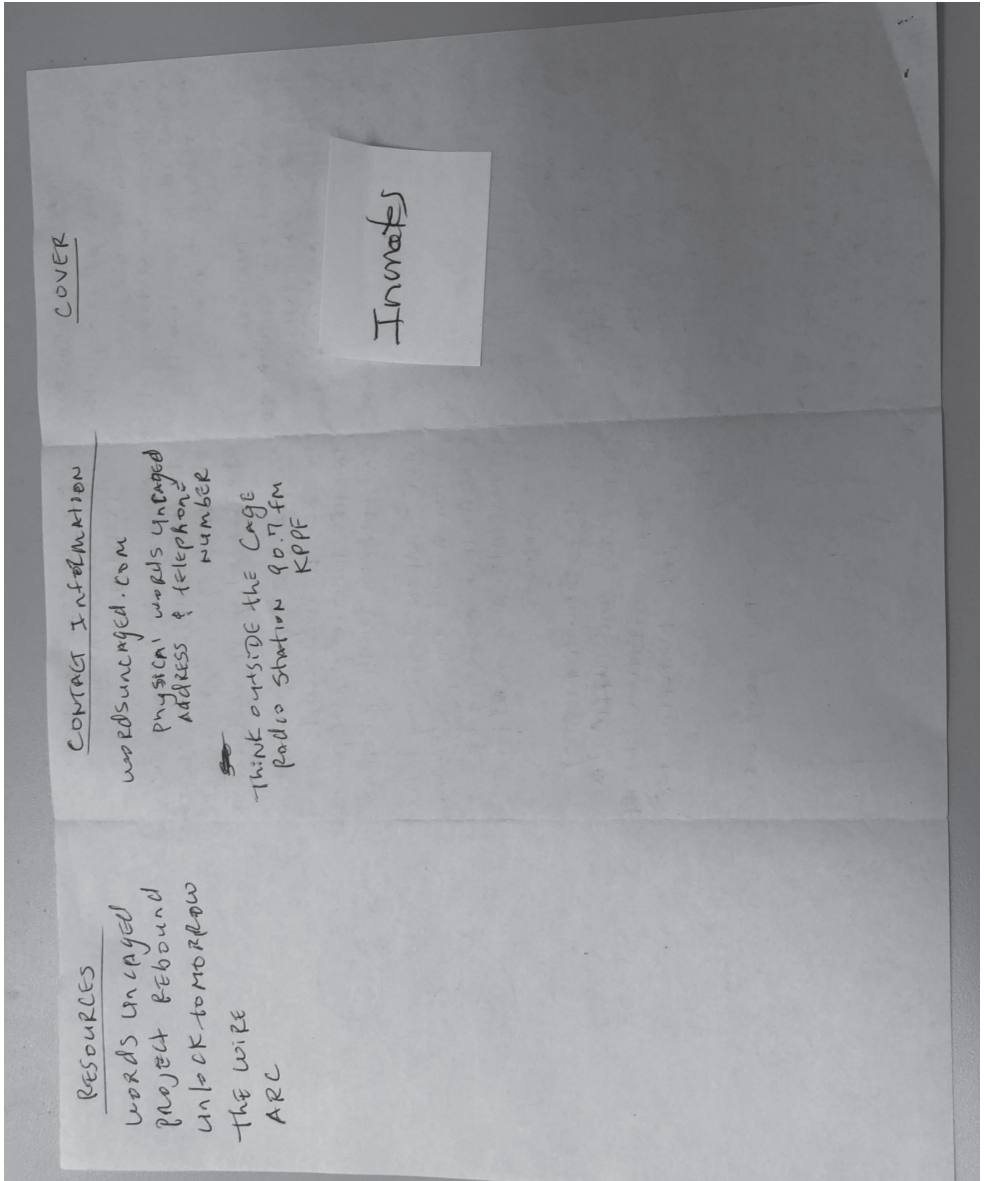


Figure 2-4

### 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. **WordsIncaged** gives me that platform to speak and tell my story." -- Joseph W.*



James Joseph Cain  
L.A.W.O.P., Incarcerator  
21-Years Young  
C.S.I.L.A., Undergrad

In the oppressed, seek to also suffer with them and fight at their side. (Peters)

Postcard by James Cain, LWOP.



## WORDS INCAGED

CALIFORNIA STATE PRISON,  
LANCASTER

[www.wordsincaged.com](http://www.wordsincaged.com)  
[wordsincaged@gmail.com](mailto:wordsincaged@gmail.com)  
ATTN: Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy  
5651 State University Dr., E&T A636  
Los Angeles, CA 90032

### Other Resources

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



Oll on Canvas, Christian Brantcomb,  
LWOP. Served 23 years.



Lorenzo Flores  
LWOP. Served 22 years.

START YOUR  
**WORDS INCAGED**  
CHAPTER TODAY

## Not Inmates— Incarcerated Writers.

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.



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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# Breaking Free While Locked Up:

## Rewriting Narratives of Authority, Addiction, and Recovery via University-Community Partnership

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**Taryn Collis,**  
*community-based actor/  
artist,*

**Felice Davis,**  
*formerly of the  
Washington Corrections  
Center for Women,*

**& Jennifer A. Smith,**  
*Pacific Lutheran  
University*

*This article shares first-hand experiences and reflections of individuals who participated in a community writing project between university students and women incarcerated and participating in a therapeutic community (TC) in Washington state. Together, the students and women explored the causes, impacts, and treatment of addiction and designed an online platform to share their writing, artwork, and research about the issues that have shaped their lives. Through the reflections of the participants and sponsors, common themes—such as navigating dynamics of stereotypes and authority, reframing narratives of transformation, and building connections through both empathy and alterity—emerge. This article explores the opportunities and complexities that emerge when unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers collaborate to create a project to help reshape rhetorics not only about addiction and recovery within a carceral setting but also about the potential of a liberatory experience within such a setting.*

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*It is easy for people to stereotype and make assumptions about things that are generally seen as negative. Society has a way of viewing*

*criminals as criminals and not the people they are before and after they committed a crime. I want my story to be about me as me, not me the drug dealer but me the mom, the daughter, me the strong woman who has suffered many traumatic experiences but was able to make it through with my head held high. If my story can show that not all people are the things they've done, maybe, just maybe, the stereotypes won't be so strong.*

—Ms. Steeple, TC author

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

In spring 2018, Felice Davis, former associate superintendent of programs at the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) invited students enrolled in an honors class<sup>1</sup> taught by Dr. Jennifer Smith at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) into the facility to work on a collaborative project. Specifically, Felice wanted to connect the students to the therapeutic community (TC). The TC is a recovery program housed within the minimum-security section of the facility that provides participants with structure, support, and skills to come to terms with the factors and decisions that led to their addiction and incarceration and develop habits for a successful recovery. Five PLU students entered the facility three times and participated alongside the women in TC in writing workshops facilitated by Seattle-based performance artist and educator Taryn Collis.<sup>2</sup> The remaining fifteen students created a website and wrote articles to provide context. The result of this partnership is “Breaking Free While Locked Up,” (<http://scalar.pludhlab.org/wccw-project/index>) a multimodal platform including text, audio, and image that provides a portrait of women working towards their recovery while incarcerated and research about the various issues related to their experiences, such as mental illness, prison programs, and trauma-informed treatments.

- 1 The title of the class is IHON 253: Gender, Sexuality, and Culture. Using feminist, queer, and critical race theories, some of the specific issues that the class examined that semester included incarceration, intersectionality, and revolution and social change in the United States.
- 2 Jennifer and Felice knew each other because of Jennifer's role as a faculty member in the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound, which provides college-level courses within WCCW, and Taryn has been a long-time collaborator with WCCW via various theater projects.

While engaging university students in such interactions can be a transformative experience for them, doing so may inadvertently objectify the incarcerated participants. In “What is Higher Education in Prison?” Erin L. Castro and Mary R. Gould (2018) observe that, at times, “[t]he prison classroom is framed as providing a positive and unique experience for unincarcerated university students with little to no regard for the desires, needs [. . . and], dignity of incarcerated people” (8). With this in mind, the sponsors entered into this partnership with the intention of creating an equitable and mutually beneficial experience for all participants. More broadly, we sought to establish an authentic partnership between university students and incarcerated writers so as to imagine the liberatory space that bell hooks (1994) describes in *Teaching to Transgress*:

The classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (207).

To “face reality” in this particular project joining unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers is to acknowledge similarities and differences, to wonder at our shared sameness and distinct otherness so that the “breaking free” is a mutual undertaking of responsibility, both to self and others and within individual and structural contexts.

Accordingly, a central goal was to confront stereotypes between unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers via mutual writing activities. By having both groups write and share stories related to addiction and recovery (sample prompt: “What does recovery taste like? What does recovery sound like?” etc.) as well as about how others may misperceive them (sample prompt: “When you look at me, what you do not see is . . .”), we intended to surface commonalities in light of surface-level differences. Another shared goal was to collectively create a platform that would educate a general audience about the experiences of the women in the TC. To be successful, the platform needed to provide the women in TC with



an opportunity to construct their own stories so as to “speak back” against the stereotypes applied to them, while simultaneously enabling the PLU students to use the skills and resources available to them to amplify the women’s voices and provide readers with information about issues surrounding women, addiction, and incarceration. Combining the women’s creative pieces with the expository articles written by the students provided a more complete portrait of the causes and consequences of addiction and incarceration, framing both within a micro and macro-analytic context.

As this project was an assignment for the PLU students, Jennifer outlined several objectives that were unique to them in an attempt to create opportunities to “imagine ways to move beyond boundaries” within their context as university students: to apply the theory read and discussed in class to the design and execution of this project and to examine and reflect upon the boundaries and connections between universities and prisons as well as the general population and people who are incarcerated. To assist students in meeting these goals, Jennifer briefly lectured on excerpts from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* as well as assigned articles about total institutions<sup>3</sup> and how gender shapes the practices and experiences of incarceration.

For Taryn, making this project a “practice of freedom” required shared creative activities; for Felice, this would be achieved by bringing together two vastly different communities; while for Jennifer, drawing out the parallels between prisons and universities set the foundation for the transgression described above by hooks.

This article examines the extent to which the project achieved its aim of providing a transgressive learning experience for unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers as they worked together to reshape stereotypes about incarceration, addiction, and recovery. The article’s structure attempts to reflect the dynamic created by the project sponsors, in which the voices of the incarcerated writers and PLU students direct the content and structure as much

3 Total institutions, as defined by Erving Goffman (1961), are “places of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life” (492).



as possible within the mediated contexts of being in a prison or a university class.<sup>4</sup> Through their reflections, common themes—such as navigating stereotypes and dynamics of authority, reframing narratives of transformation, and building connections through empathy and alterity—emerge and reveal the extent to which the project achieved its overall aim of creating a mutually liberatory space.

## **MISCONCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES: “WORTH GETTING A SECOND CHANCE”**

While one of the primary objectives of this project was to provide the TC authors with a platform to represent themselves and confront stereotypes that the general public has about women, addiction, and incarceration, the PLU students needed to reflect on the stereotypes they held as well as place those stereotypes within broader ideologies of privilege and oppression and recognize how this dynamic shaped their partnership with the TC writers. Only then could they confront “important questions about how to support incarcerated women’s self-representation and critical literacy in ways that more directly effect redistributions around power over writing and representation and that build solidarity between prison insiders and outsiders” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 70).

Before entering WCCW for the first time, the PLU students listed the stereotypes about addicts and incarcerated individuals that came to mind. These included the following: the crimes that people who are sent to prison commit are really severe; a person in prison doesn’t have any ties to the outside world; people with addictions who go to prison just go through the motions and want to get out and not recover; and addicts started using recreationally and not as a reaction to trauma or recovery from injury. They then reflected on the sources of such assumptions, since none of them had had direct experience with incarceration, and it became clear how popular culture shaped their perceptions of incarceration and addiction. Even the students who had some experience with addiction admitted that they too felt that the stereotypes carried a kernel of truth. The statements below reflect how the PLU students and the TC writers understand

<sup>4</sup> The TC authors’ and PLU students’ quotes are included with their permission. Also, some of the TC authors chose to use pseudonyms.”

these stereotypes, their relationship to them, and how individual stories have the ability to reshape the boundaries between powerful/powerless, worthy/unworthy, and authority/novice—among many others—that stereotypes are meant to build and maintain.

I held some preconceived notions before entering WCCW and meeting the women of the TC program. I expected cold and callous attitudes, products of the loss of autonomy and freedom while in prison, and a distance between “us” and “them” that no amount of scholarly articles and conversation could cross.

—Tess Olson, PLU student

[A]ddicts and addiction are still viewed negatively, and in my opinion, addicts are viewed as people who are no longer worth anyone’s effort, time, or money because they are never going to change and are nothing more than a thief, an uneducated, unemployed individual, instead of the truth—that most addicts suffer from extreme amounts of trauma and abuse and are worth getting a second chance.

—Missy Dee, TC author

To me, the authors’ identities are found in their stories. One thing that is interesting about being in the website group was that I never got to see the authors. All I had to go off of was their words. Yet their identity was clear to me; the love or ferocity or forgiveness that they shared was who they were and I needed nothing else. Their identities became something new, they left the old categories behind.

—Kristin Ringstad, PLU student

To me, sharing my story with PLU made me think that no matter what I said, or how I explained it, I wasn’t getting judged or looked at funny. It made me feel comfortable as well hearing some of their stories; it was inspiring because I was able to hear that how they thought of incarcerated people was really how they looked at it before, and now they have a better look and are wanting to change their way of thinking.

—Ms. Campos, TC author

Thus, having PLU students explore such stereotypes and reflect on how they inform their perceptions of the women with whom they were about to collaborate as well as having the women reflect on what the PLU students may be thinking about them were both essential to setting the stage for an ethical partnership. After doing such work, the participants were primed to potentially “effect redistributions around power over writing and representation and [. . .] build solidarity between prison insiders and outsiders,” as described previously by Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015).

## **AUTHORITY, SELF-REPRESENTATION, AND ADVOCACY: “TELLING STORIES, NOT STATISTICS”**

Prison writing programs, specifically those that bring university students into the facility, must facilitate the act of authorship within complex and variable power dynamics, where incarcerated writers have limited authority and university students carry significant privileges in with them. As Plemons (2013) describes, while “[t]he rules of the PIC [prison industrial complex] may, over time, be negotiated, [. . .] they cannot be ignored, because when they are, the punishment comes back—every time—on the incarcerated men and women who choose to risk community partnership” (45). Still, such writing programs can be powerful tools for enabling incarcerated individuals the opportunity to speak back against stereotypes; they can also provide unincarcerated university students an opportunity to critically explore the power dynamics of advocacy. Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) suggest four practices to guide literacy work within prisons that reflect a feminist ethic, so as to navigate the complex and compromised context of collaborating with a prison: “support and sponsor women’s contributions to their own self-representation” (70), “build critical literacy about US prison conditions and policy both inside and outside” (76), “accelerate tactical redistributions of power” (79), and “mak[e] space for solidarities” (81). In our attempt to practice this ethic, we directly addressed questions of authority with the PLU students. Felice visited the students before they entered WCCW and shared with them how—despite the fact that they would likely be younger than most of the women they met—they carried significant authority into the space. For instance, how the women moved about was restricted according to where we moved because they were not permitted to walk directly behind us.

While mutuality was a central goal, given the stark differences between incarcerated and unincarcerated individuals, the sponsors sought to establish the incarcerated writers as the teachers—where they were not the object of study but rather were granted authority to speak as experts on their own lives as well as to direct the learning that was occurring. Within this context, the sponsors’ aim was to have the incarcerated writers’ desires to write their own stories and share them broadly shape the project from the beginning—when Felice asked the women if they would be willing to work with PLU students—and continue to do so throughout, while also providing them with “the infrastructure to support publication, to which many incarcerated authors do not have access” (Castro and Gould 2018, 9-10). The sponsors created a consent form for the TC writers to complete and sign that outlined their agreement to have their work published online; it also enabled them to articulate how they wanted their work presented and the name under which they would like to publish. We talked through this consent form with the women and PLU students so that all involved were aware that the TC writers determined the parameters of this collaboration and their self-representation. As Plemons (2014) notes, agency in a prison-education context “rarely takes the form of emancipation, rarely gets to tell grand narratives of victory. [. . .] sometimes it looks like the penning of a political essay for independent Bay area newspaper, but most days it looks like fifteen men in blue shirts sitting around a table writing as fast as they can” (18). Or, in the case of this project, it looks like the TC writers approving the list of topic articles prior to the students writing them, determining the title of the project, reviewing and providing feedback on the draft of the website as well as on their own individual author pages,<sup>5</sup> and outlining who they would like to read their work so that the PLU students could promote it accordingly:

I feel that adolescent youth would be the primary audience that I would like to hear our stories of addiction and incarceration, both for those children who are starting to get in trouble or even as presentation in schools or treatment centers. I would also like to see our stories teach the government and legislators for DOC to

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<sup>5</sup> Because we were in the minimum-security portion of the facility, we had access to a computer connected to the Internet and a smartboard and could thus show the women the website as it was under construction.

see that TC does work and is worth spending the money to make happen, as well as employers who may make hiring decisions based on criminal history. Also, family members who are affected by addiction, to understand the disease and what their loved ones are going through.

—Ms. Gee, TC author

To people who are hurting and don't know that they are *not alone*. Even if my story could save a lost soul or help someone that sees no future, no hope, or worse, no love. Opening up to strangers whom I don't know might open up a door to recovery or better a hope, a wish, or a dream. I also hope that most who need to know are people who were victims of crimes.

—Ms. Griese, TC author

Additionally, during the first meeting, the women in TC told the PLU students that one of the most important actions they could take for them is to serve as advocates. The PLU students discovered a sense of purpose within the project once they were assigned this role, learning that—despite their privileges and status—they were not in the WCCW to “teach” or “help.” Rather, they were given a charge to complete on behalf of the TC writers. In this way, the project sought to push against the boundaries delineating teacher/student and authority/apprentice and thus reconfigure the unincarcerated university students' engagement with incarcerated individuals so as not to solely be siphons but to create a university-community writing partnership that becomes a kind of “creative resistance [. . . because] the resistor retain[s] ownership of—or agency—over the program” (Plemons 2013, 40).

This call to action helped me understand my role in this project not as someone whose voice needs to be heard, but as someone who needs to acknowledge my place within a system of oppression and start actively working to change the system, to no longer remain simply an observer and to help those whose voices have been kept hidden be heard.

—Isabel LaRue, PLU student

After our free-write time, we asked the women what they hoped to get out of this project and one of the words used was “advocacy.” This term resonated with me a lot because I felt like this project had a central purpose: to get these women’s stories out. For them to have a platform and be able to reach those that are struggling with addiction or have been tempted by addiction, and say, “there is hope; there is recovery.” They want their opinions and voices to be heard out from under a society that oppresses them.

—Annabelle Falloria, PLU student

Yet the extent to which we achieved such “creative resistance” remains unclear. “[T]he unstable notion of ‘consent’ within carceral facilities” (75) described by Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) inevitably remained by virtue of the setting. The sponsors created the schedule for the project, set a loose agenda, and crafted prompts; while we sometimes created the prompts in collaboration with the PLU students or TC writers, we still selected which were ultimately used to generate writing. Additionally, the PLU students were participating in this project by virtue of completing an assignment, so their ability to “consent” was also mediated.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the issue of who held ownership or agency over the program—between the sponsors, PLU students, and TC writers—remained murky even as it sought “tactical redistributions of power” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 79).

## **NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: “I BEGAN TO TAKE OFF MASKS OF SORROW, REGRET, GUILT, AND SHAME”**

Because narratives of transformation written by incarcerated authors can both fulfill expectations of “prison writing” and carry the seeds of resistance and critique, they provided a starting point for project sponsors to introduce occasions for reflection on structural inequities. Erica Meiners (2007) summarizes such stories in *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*: “I was born; I had problems; I made the wrong choices; I was apprehended by the police; I was incarcerated; I found God and He helped me. And . . . my life is now on a better track” (139). This narrative is well-worn as it fulfills the broader public’s expectations of what should be happening inside

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6 Unlike the women in TC, they were not asked if they were willing to participate in the project. Rather, their consent was assumed when they enrolled in the course.

of “correctional” facilities, thus justifying not only their continued existence but also their proliferation. Yet, such a narrative may be what incarcerated authors want to communicate, particularly to their families, friends, loved ones, or the people harmed by their actions. This story of transformation may be, as some would say, the author’s “truth.” Many of the stories shared by the TC authors echo the narrative of transformation. As Taryn notes: “What has always struck me about the members of the TC is their desire to have others learn from their mistakes, to have the cycle of addiction stop with them. They know that numbers are only a portion of their story and that narrative and creative expression are necessary to put a face to the numbers.” The TC members chose to write these narratives because they reflected the work in which they were embedded on a daily basis. The TC program involved significant writing and reflection, so completing such activities with the PLU students came easily to them. Plus, they were proud of the work they were doing to change their behaviors and wanted to share those stories not only with loved ones but also with politicians and policymakers who could support such recovery programs.

Plemons (2013) offers a way for literacy program sponsors to think about such narratives: “For me, however, narratives like that of Jackson [transformation narratives] significantly complicate the genre, calling for a ‘both/and’ space where incarcerated writers have the freedom to tell their stories as they see it, even when those tellings seem to come back around to worn out myths” (46). Part of engaging incarcerated authors is enabling them to write what they wish to write, to have the choice in an often choiceless living circumstance to express what they need and want to express.

However, because the women’s stories were framed on the website alongside articles about trauma, mental illness, addiction, etc., the intention was to communicate that these authors did not find themselves in TC solely because of their individual character. Rather, the audience is invited to consider how a complex combination of individual and social factors shaped the trajectory of their lives. The intention of such contextualization was to mitigate the impact of an “individualized ethic that focuses on the women themselves, who are in need of either therapeutic or rehabilitative transformation, rather than on broader social or systemic analysis” (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015, 74).

I came into prison scared of what I was about to experience. By the grace of God and the stipulations of my sentence, I was placed in Serenity TC treatment program. During my time so far, I have had the chance to let go of all that had been weighing me down. Slowly, I began to take off masks of sorrow, regret, guilt, and shame. Also, unload the baggage of past traumas. Because of this, I was left raw, not knowing who I was anymore, not even what my likes and interests, goals, and dreams for the future were.

—Ms. Gee, TC author

What you don't see is my hope, my ambition, goals, and dreams.  
The blueprint in my mind to execute all of those things.  
It's hard to see the light in the dark  
when you're crying alone and can't find the spark  
that life requires.  
You need that hope,  
clean the grime from the lens of my life  
a telescope.  
My future is not made in the silhouette of my past.  
Failure will not pervade tomorrow's forecast.  
This forward step is the first  
not the last.

—Ms. Moses, TC author

Further, more often than not, the TC writers framed themselves and their peers as the vehicles of recovery and redemption rather than the institution itself, thus reframing readers' expectations of such narratives of transformation.

Here I am. I'm sober, my mind is able to function a lot more, I'm happy, [and] I always have a smile on my face. My family is back in my life [and] I feel so much more complete. [. . .] With the help of my sisters, their stories have changed me and my fight to want this more than ever because I have grown to be someone completely different. I am gonna fight my addiction to stay sober and have a beautiful life clean.

—Ms. Campos, TC writer



We are all brave, courageous women, pushing through our pain toward recovery. We are all stronger than we think. [. . .] To every single woman in this community, I believe in you.

—Ms. Beaumont, TC writer

This was an important feature not only of their own self-representation but also of how they represented their peers, presenting them as women who have navigated various traumas and experiences of oppression to possess power, strength, and positive influence over others.

## **BUILDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH EMPATHY AND ALTERITY: “COMPASSION MIXED WITH CURIOSITY”**

Finally, another dynamic of prison writing projects that warrants examination is the role of writing in cultivating empathy as a foundation for community. Each of the sponsors sought to create such a program because texts are valued, in part, due to their capacity to enable readers to connect with the experiences of people who are different from them. Yet, Jennifer in particular wanted the PLU students to contemplate the limits of empathy, given their privileged position in relation to the TC writers. As Traci Brimhall (2015) notes, “[I]t feels like a form of emotional tourism that lets someone understand another lived experience [yet] it cost us nothing.” Empathy can rely too much on comfort and connection in engaging across difference. This begs the question of empathy’s use when readers are discomfited by a text because it may implicate them in “unpleasant truths.” Paul Burcher (2018), who is a clinician-educator, recommends that alterity be valued as a skill alongside empathy for future doctors. Burcher asserts “that recognition of difference in other people opens me to a world infinitely larger than my own selfish needs, and that this is the ground of my sense of responsibility” (19). Rather than seeking a mirror of one’s self upon which to build a connection, acknowledging another person’s difference provides the opportunity for “appreciation, even awe at the incommensurability of the life of a patient [or person] with my own” (18). Although our article is exploring a different context than that of patient-doctor,

Burcher's argument remains useful in identifying avenues that center difference as a way for unincarcerated university students and incarcerated writers to build community—to “face reality,” according to hooks—as well as a sense of responsibility to each other.

The similarities between the participants—such as having some connection to addiction (whether directly or indirectly), experiences of trauma, complicated relationships with family members, and living with and being surrounded by many of the same people day after day—helped to create a sense of comfort, ease, and connection, which was a goal of the project.

The TC and PLU community was compassion mixed with curiosity. Being a part of it definitely empowered me in such a positive way. It gave my struggles a way to become strengths. It has helped me to see that even though we (TC and PLU students) are in two completely different institutions, we are still the same. The compassion and understanding the students radiated was so unexpected and refreshing, it was such a great experience to feel listened to and like I mattered.

—Ms. Skinner, TC author

I believe that the mix between the PLU college students and us as incarcerated individuals is so important to find out how alike we really are. Before being involved in this I thought that I would never relate to a college student or have them be compassionate when hearing my story. I think we created a community of mutual understanding that we are all human and have different experiences but also a lot of the same as well. We have been through some kind of struggles in our lives that make us who we are today.

—Ms. Beaumont, TC author

Yet, the differences remained obvious, if not overtly stated. The TC writers all wore the same clothing; they lived behind barbed wire; they had scheduled wake-up and eating times; their movement between buildings was regulated. The PLU students could leave the gates behind and drive down the road; they could set their own schedules; they could see and communicate with their loved ones

whenever they wanted. While everyone existed within the same systems of privilege and oppression, how these systems demarcated their identities and experiences were unavoidably different and could not—and should not—be erased.

The disturbing reality of the criminalization of mental illness struck me hard and made me reflect upon and be grateful for my privilege to be raised in an upper-middle-class environment where my addictive behavior was able to be addressed by the mental health system through insurance. The uneasy feeling of seeing myself in some of the women I conversed with does not come from a rejection of myself in them and them in me, but rather the acceptance of bits of the women I saw in myself and the fact that, had I not been raised in the environment I had been, I could have likely been on the opposite side of the fence.

—Tess Olson, PLU

Discomfort was ever-present, even if not pronounced. The source of this discomfort, in part, resides in the recognition of irreconcilable differences, which in this instance was “an encounter with someone who shatters the comfortable world that appears to serve only us” (Burcher 2018, 20). Such shattering is necessary to achieve the transgression hooks sees as a potential of education, and engaging differences between us can thus be productive without compromising the connections built through story.

## **HOPE: “A FUTURE THAT ISN’T AS UNATTAINABLE AS WE THOUGHT”**

In concluding this article, we continue to reflect on hooks’s (1994) vision of a liberatory classroom:

The classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (207).

The title that the TC authors came up with for this project—"Breaking Free While Locked Up"—captures the paradoxical potential of recovery and writing programs that occur behind bars.

The participants' reflections indicate that the project achieved some of its goals, with one of its strengths being the impact it had on students' perceptions of incarcerated individuals and people struggling with addiction. As Taryn describes:

We see students walk through the gates and barbed wire fences with wide eyes hiding their fear behind their curiosity, we see them share and ask questions out of a sense of obligation, we see them struggling to find their role in a classroom among women with long lives full of events that were previously unimaginable. But in the course of only a couple classes, they are drawing parallels to their own lives, seeing their fellow classmates as "writers, authors, mothers" instead of "criminals, addicts, felons." They are looking at events from their own lives that are addictive, but not criminal; dangerous, but that found a stopping point; could have ended them up "inside," but didn't. Seeing your lofty goals of changing the context in which society and those in power view incarceration and addiction change on a small, individual scale makes that goal suddenly not seem so lofty. As I see the incremental change in my students, myself, and those I share my work and these stories with—it seems so very tangible.

Similarly, Felice notes how the women of TC benefited from hearing the students' stories as well:

What came out of that was real, genuine, collaborative learning and conversation. Students spoke about their family experience with addiction or what they had seen in the community around addiction, and incarcerated women talked about their pathways to incarceration and the role that addiction played in those pathways. This is why it is so important to get drastically different types of communities together, to reflect on how easy it is to stick to one community when you are not required to see, meet, or speak to others.

In this way, stereotypes were directly countered, and participants recognized experiences—whether shared trauma or a love of Cheetos—that served as humanizing points of connection. Also, the participants achieved the aim of collectively creating a platform that could educate a general audience about the experiences of the women in the TC. Given the positive experiences of the participants, we are currently in the midst of adding to this project with a new group of TC writers and PLU students. Before the new PLU students entered WCCW for the first time, the women in TC looked through the “Breaking Free While Locked Up” website and provided suggestions for how it could be more dynamic and engaging, which directed the work of the students charged with updating and adding to the site. Additionally, we were granted permission to record two podcasts; the subjects of these podcasts—again determined by the TC authors—are “Stereotypes” and “Favorite Moments & Motivation.”<sup>7</sup> Students interviewed the TC authors, using questions developed by the women, as well as recorded and edited the podcasts. Additionally, a resources page was added to the site, with the TC writers reviewing and approving it before being posted.

While these strengths are significant, questions remain. For one, we have not assessed the impact of the platform on audience. While we assume that the experience of reading about and hearing the women’s stories positively impacted people’s perceptions of addiction and incarceration, we do not have evidence to confirm that assumption. Also, there are questions lingering about the silences within TC. While some women actively seek to be placed within TC, some are involuntarily assigned to the program via the Drug Offender Sentencing Alternative (DOSA). How do the women who did not actively seek DOSA experience TC? Another silence exists in regards to the TC writers who have since left WCCW. We have not heard from those TC writers to know about the impact of having their stories broadly and publicly available. For Jennifer and her role, questions arise about the possibility of being seen as “promoting” or “supporting” the PIC via a classroom assignment. While it is beneficial to have students draw parallels between the total institutions of prison and universities and think specifically

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<sup>7</sup> According to Felice, these podcasts are the first to be recorded within a Washington state prison.

about how the concept of discipline interacts in both, conversations about justice, complicity, and power must remain active.

Yet, despite the contradictions of finding a path to recovery within a carceral setting and the complexity in providing a university-affiliated writing program within the walls of a prison, there is also the potential to find communion, to be awed by difference, to heal, to find a measure of freedom, and thus approach the liberatory space that hooks imagines, seeing that such a space might not be, in the words of a TC author, “as unattainable as we thought.”

As this article begins with the words of one of the TC authors, it is only fitting that it concludes with the words of two of the participants on hope and what it means to them and their community.

Today, I really feel true hope that I can escape that vicious guilty cycle of addiction. That unrealistic belief that the relief you seek from your pain will come with that next hit. I feel that relief only when I am honest, when I can ask for help, admit my faults, and be surrounded by my TC sisters who are all doing the same. Fighting for our lives and a future that isn't as unattainable as we thought.

—Ms. Evans, TC author

Pain is growth. I must learn to embrace the pain. Learn from being caught up and released. Release feels like freedom. Freedom is not just a thing when I get out of prison. Freedom, TRUE freedom is found within my heart, my mind, my soul. Only then are the chains broken.

—Ms. Skinner, TC author

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# **Recognizing Histories, Identities, and Abolitionist Possibilities**



# (Re)Defining Literacy

**Alyssa Knight**

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When I first stepped into an official college classroom inside prison, I had no idea that my writing had value. I was always told that I was an articulate person, an attribute that made me stick out amongst my peers in and outside of the correctional facility. I took on the habit of quickly learning the local vernacular to better camouflage my love of complex, formal language. Yet, those pesky, multisyllable symbols still managed to sneak out of my mouth and into my conversations at the most inopportune of times. Slurring or mincing words could not mask the slip of “multitudinous,” “ambivalence,” or “fruition” from my everyday speech. In the classroom, however, as I began to write academic papers, I realized that my grasp of the formal constructions of the English language that came so naturally to me gave me a clear advantage in speaking the local lingo of education.

While I have never been a huge fan of writing and cringed at the thought of sitting

through an English 101 class after having tested out of both 101 and 102 when I entered community college in my pre-carceral life, I came into this college classroom committed to learning. To my surprise, my superpower unfurled and flexed as if wings had sprouted from my back after years of being restrictively bound inside my skin. Let me temper my ego here by saying that I was far from perfect. My professor knocked the certainty of my ability to wield words on paper down a few notches with every piece of work I turned in. The beauty is that her criticism came in the form of questions, begging me for clarification, asking me for more fleshing out of ideas, never seeking to blunt my skill. This constant challenge to my strength made me grow exponentially. I realized it was not just putting my thoughts into language, but honing the skill of thinking critically and complexly about the world around me that was the true value here. Close reading paired with the art of articulation remade my previously hidden talent.

In English 102, I wrote a paper on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and for the first time, I felt like I had thought so far beyond what the author may have intended that the thought itself felt my very own. This was the moment I became an academic. What I never imagined on that first day is that I would reach a point where words had to catch up with me because I was learning that language sometimes had to be stretched, morphed, and reshaped to convey the workings of an active mind. The "carnavalesque," "microaggressions," and "the spectacular"—all of these words my word processor refused to recognize as true or correct in their context and yet are words that demanded to be used nonetheless.

Long deserted was the feeling that I would show English a thing or two, for English class was beating me down and building me back up into a literary force to be reckoned with. Again, again, I humbly recognize that my skill always and forever needs honing. However, it is with this constant nudging, pushing, and sometimes downright shoving in the classroom that my mind and my pen wield power I never knew I had. Am I a lingual master? Hardly. But my writing has value. Moreover, my experience has value, and it infuses all of my ponderings in the classroom with a flare that is uniquely my own. This value is not just present because I happen to have a veritable

talent for stringing effective sentences together; instead, it is there because I make the language work for the vastness of thoughts my mind constantly produces. I am a student in prison. I am an academic. I have value. And I make words work for me.

Proper English is not the measuring stick, as I once believed, for even in the slangest of terms, a keen mind is molding the complexities of language to fit the diversity of everyday life. We are all literate in our own way. Rarely do I find myself code switching to hide my superpower now. I speak and write proudly in my common tongue. I have witnessed the college classroom inside the prison become a place for the melding of dialects. A symbiotic relationship has developed in which professor and student, carceral world and free world, respect one another's experiential literacy, exchange fluency, and are ultimately more articulate for it. What I have learned here is that literacy comes in all forms, and we are shaping the world as we both grasp and create anew the words to describe it.

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# (Anti) Prison Literacy: Abolition and Queer Community Writing

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*This article suggests that the framework of prison abolition in prison literacy studies should be developed through the relational potential of queer community literacy practices among incarcerated writers. To that end, the author presents findings from a critical discourse analysis of a newspaper by incarcerated LGBTQ+ writers. Three primary forms of audience address and rhetorical approach are identified, as well as the opportunities they offer to understand the risks and complexities of writing in prison. These differentiations in literacy practice highlight the necessity of building relationships among and between incarcerated LGBTQ+ people in prison literacy initiatives, and situate the conclusion that prison abolition's demonstrated commitment to transformative social relations has a direct application to understanding and shaping prison literacy programming and practice.*

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**F**or the first time in twenty years, public opinion is shifting away from harsher sentencing laws. Multiple outlets, including the American Civil Liberties Union, report that public opinion



favors reduced incarceration rates in favor of reducing incarceration rates in the United States, particularly in terms of increased distinction between violent and non-violent crime and a renewed inquiry into how severely the latter ought to be punished (Pfaff 2018). In some ways, this shift is a successful alignment with the politics of prison literacy studies, which have promoted circulation paths of writing by prisoners that create engagements with those in the free world, often with the intent of forming more nuanced perspectives about prisoners in free society (Jacobi and Johnston 2011). In higher education, the exchange of writing and, at times, shared classroom space between free and incarcerated students is an established pedagogical practice, often implemented with the purpose of increasing civic engagement and dialogue on prisons and policing (Hinshaw and Jacobi 2015; Hinshaw and Klarreich 2014; Pompa 2013). However, other recent rhetorical moments entrench the power differentials between prisoners and the free-world publics they want—and are encouraged—to address. This year, when presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg contended that voting rights should be stripped from people while they are incarcerated on felony charges, he did so to applause, while subsequent polling suggested that his position was a popular one. Public perceptions—and even civic discourses—on incarceration may be shifting, but this shift is not synonymous with sharing civic powers. Though the writing and other rhetorical presences of incarcerated people have helped create successful appeals for prison reforms in various publics (however diverse and conflicting those reforms may be), incarcerated people themselves are not widely recognized as members of those publics. In this article, I offer a framework of queer prison abolition drawn from my experience as a member of Black and Pink, a community of LGBTQ+/HIV+ activists organizing for prison abolition, and assess the potential of this framework to expand the ongoing efforts to center prisoners in civic dialogues about incarceration. In particular, I figure the relationship-building functions of literacy in prison as abolitionist practice by analyzing one genre (the “family letter”) from Black and Pink’s bimonthly newspaper. Within these letters, I detail three degrees of audience for whom incarcerated writers navigate complex power differentials: readers outside prison, readers inside prison, and, finally, one-to-one exchanges (often termed “shout outs”) where writers address each other individually.

How incarcerated writers engage with diverse audiences gives insight into the restricted literacy landscape of the prison, particularly revealing the ways that prisoners can use writing to address other incarcerated people. In addition to banned books, censorship, and mail surveillance, prisoners are prohibited from contacting other incarcerated people; free allies are necessary to facilitate the circulation of writing from prisoners to prisoners across individual prisons. Such restrictive carceral literacy practices are an example of what Eric Darnell Pritchard (2017) has termed “normative literacy”—literacy that disciplines and corrects gendered, sexualized, and racialized bodies that are non-normative according to “oppressive stems that create and maintain the dominant culture and are so pervasive throughout it” (22). Directing the circulation of prison writing away from other incarcerated persons and toward free society controls many of the ways prisoners and free people might imagine and include each other as audiences and build political relationships. It particularly shapes how incarcerated LGBTQ+ people include themselves in larger political narratives, what is safe for them to say and write, and who they are allowed to address. While I suggest that the *Black and Pink* newspaper provides queer alternatives to some of the audiences and circulation paths established for prison writing as they are sanctioned by the state, the limits of the newspaper are visible even in some of its more liberatory moments; its writing reveals as much risk as it does liberation.

A key tenet of abolition is reimagined social relations (Barrow et al. 2017; Wang 2018). Abolitionists consistently explain decarceration as an imaginative community-building exercise; Dylan Rodriguez (2019) describes abolitionist praxis as “a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice” (1576). When seen fully, carceral structures are relational and participatory and can be transformed through literacies that adjust those relations. Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of the global BLM network, makes a case for abolition in the *Harvard Law Review* by sharing moments from her family relationships and history in which systems of prison and policing converged to make herself and her family members more, rather than less, vulnerable to violence and harm. Cullors shares direct experience with prison and police while tracing the socially relational and familial implications of carceral culture on black queer lives. Reimagining and rebuilding

relationships is abolitionist work and, in and across prisons, it is work heavily driven by literacy and negotiated through its political networks. A framework of prison abolition must examine the relationships and power dynamics that these networks make possible and impossible.

Like many abolitionist scholars and activists, my interest in prison writing was facilitated by the incarceration of a family member. The first time my brother was locked up for longer than a few nights, our relationship helped prompt his arrest. Earlier that day, I wrote his address on a Section 35 form, a process in Massachusetts that permits family members and caregivers to request mandatory hospitalization. I was encouraged to do this at the courthouse, where I had appeared but my brother had not. His probation officer suggested that the presiding judge might respond favorably to evidence of a treatment program when my brother eventually, by choice or force, would appear before her. I filled out the form, and he was arrested less than an hour later at the address I provided. The same judge who approved the filing of Section 35 held him without bail (hospitalization immediately came off the table), perhaps also due in part to my description of his addiction in court. I asked to visit him, but my paperwork wasn't processed before I had to return to my job in another city. There was an expedited process for immediate family members, but I soon discovered that "immediate" meant children, parents, and legally married partners, not siblings.

Carceral definitions of family were on my mind when I began attending "mail processing," a community space where Black and Pink members read and reply to mail from incarcerated LGBTQ+ members seeking pen pals in the free world, submitting to or subscribing to the newspaper, or responding to a national member survey that Black and Pink published in 2015. Without a direct partnership with prisons, most of the political and support work of the organization happens through the postal service. Letters are a primary means of communication, both in the pen pal relationships Black and Pink supports among incarcerated and free members and in the newspaper itself. The newspaper keeps a regular section for "Letters from Our Family," open letters written by incarcerated LGBTQ+ people to an extended queer family inside (and sometimes

outside) prisons. Since newspapers like *Black and Pink*, which circulate across prisons, must be cautious of breaching prisoner-to-prisoner contact regulations, letters addressed directly to other incarcerated individuals cannot be published in the newspaper; the family letters rely heavily upon group address to cultivate a conscious publicity. However, the letters address a range of audiences, from non-incarcerated LGBTQ+ people to individual incarcerated writers who had previously written and published a family letter. These shorter forms of address offer a rare opportunity for incarcerated writers to communicate with each other one to one. Family letters provide readers with the first-hand accounts of other LGBTQ+ prisoners and the opportunity to trace commonalities and differences among them. As Regina Kunzel (2008) notes in “Lessons in Being Gay: Queer Encounters in Gay and Lesbian Prison Activism,” the value of LGBTQ+ publications for LGBTQ+ prisoners can be measured by the circulation paths these publications take through the prison. Kunzel cites accounts from gay prisoners “lined up” to read a single copy of an issue of *Gay Community News* (17). The family letters add another layer of shared identity and experience, as they are authored not only by LGBTQ+ writers, but LGBTQ+ writers who are also incarcerated. These letters introduced me, in their multiple voices, perspectives, needs, joys, and traumas, to how the everyday writing of incarcerated LGBTQ+ people might, through the lens of abolitionist relationship-building, surface community literacy practices that engage LGBTQ+ identity as entwined with political power-building, reimagined social relations, and mutual aid.

Though nearly all letters use “family” in their salutation, a critical analysis of the letters indicates that writers address a number of different audiences in the pages of the newspaper, with a particular emphasis on building social and political relationships with other incarcerated people. When read through a relationship-centered abolitionist framework of literacy analysis, the family letters carefully negotiate the boundaries and risks of writing to other incarcerated people, and intentionally engage these relationships to form a precarious, but persistent, community of LGBTQ+ incarcerated writers. Drawing on a corpus of over 100 letters published through the last calendar year (2017), I applied Scollon’s belief in discourse analysis as a tool to “explicate the link between broad social issues and everyday talk and writing, and to arrive at a richer understanding

of the history of the practice within the habitus of the participants in a particular social action” (qtd. in Meyer 2001, 23). Writers’ lived positions varied. Some were concerned with a particular here-and-now form of immediate problem-solving, while others wanted to connect with LGBTQ+ audiences more generally. In centering my coding on their everyday choices of who to address and how to build relationships through writing, I perceived writers connecting their letters, depending on audience, to larger political concerns and shared community values. My analysis identified three levels of audience explicitly addressed by writers: letters addressed to a wider LGBTQ+ community/allies (often outside prison), letters explicitly addressed to incarcerated LGBTQ+ people generally, and letters addressed, though never in their entirety, to a particular person. Most often, these single-person forms of address were folded into letters that addressed one of the two general audiences as well, but noted another writer’s letter in the newspaper as either an exigency for writing or issued a “shout out” offering a short, directly addressed response to another letter.

## **“OUTSIDE FOR ME, INSIDE FOR YOU”: INCARCERATED WRITERS BUILDING POWER THROUGH LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY ON THE OUTSIDE**

Though not as frequently as they sought other audiences, writers of the family letters did address free people. Most writers are introduced to Black and Pink by reading the newspaper and responding to previous family letters, making the choice to include free people as an audience all the more conscious. When writers addressed audiences beyond prison walls, they constructed wider LGBTQ+ community connections, often by addressing “Black and Pink” explicitly as a group of both incarcerated *and* free LGBTQ+ people and by connecting struggles experienced in prison with larger systems of gender, sexual, and racial oppression. In one example, Andrea Rah’kayle writes:

I want to thank [...] the entire Black & Pink family incarcerated or not, for your love, support and stories of experience. I encourage you all to continue the spread of love and compassion in much needed times [...] keep fresh on the mind our young and adolescent family members out there free in the world and in Juvenile Detention facilities who are being bullied, molested,

abused, abandoned and neglected because of sexual orientation and gender identity. I encourage you all to pray for the lives lost and taken because of hate.

Here, Andrea'Rahkayle connects the "love and experience" shared among incarcerated and free people in "the entire Black and Pink family" with LGBTQ+ youth generally, specifically raising the concern of "bullying" young people in *and* out of detention. This connection draws attention to the ways readers might connect to larger LGBTQ+ struggles (bullying of LGBTQ+ youth) and incarceration, and specifically reminds that many LGBTQ+ youth experiencing bullying are in detention. She extends the political problem of the invisibility of prisoners to a cause with perceived widespread support from LGBTQ+ communities. Andrea'Rahkayle brings imprisonment to the fore of a larger and more mainstream LGBTQ+ agenda. Though not an adolescent herself, she finds means to connect wider and wider LGBTQ+ circles through the lens of incarceration.

In a similar move, another writer, Kara, who transitioned in prison, wrote a family letter about being denied photographs of herself during a fundraiser because she was wearing cosmetics, products banned in the men's unit where she is held. Instead of receiving her photos as expected, her cell was searched and her cosmetics were taken. In response, she writes:

Wow that gives me the message that I am less than a human being and something is wrong with me. Is it any wonder why the suicide rate of transgender teens is through the roof? [...] It seems that it has always been ok to marginalize one group or another because we live in a culture that thinks its okay to treat us differently or "less than." I end up with the staff here following along with the larger cultural program.

Though Kara came out as trans in prison ("I was taking pictures for the first time as a woman," she notes earlier, "none of my family has seen me as Kara."), she connects transmisogyny in prison to a "larger cultural program" that harms others, linking her struggle to the struggle of non-incarcerated LGBTQ+ people and using her

feelings of subjection (“less than a human being”) to demonstrate empathy for a wider trans community. “Because it’s not really about the pictures,” she continues, “it’s about confronting an oppressive and abusive society that murders some of its children with scorn and condemnation. A society where bullycide is an unspoken norm.” Kara uses her story to mobilize herself and others (“Who’s down?” she asks, after outlining her political priorities for transwomen in prison) toward equality for trans youth generally, identifying her life, ostensibly alienated from others, within a greater social imperative against bullycide, a visible concern among LGBTQ+ non-profit organizations and education literature.

Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara press back on political isolation by writing a relationship between their position as LGBTQ+ prisoners and bullied LGBTQ+ youth, connecting incarceration to harassment, and vice versa. Even when protecting LGBTQ+ youth, Andrea’Rakayle points out, incarcerated juveniles might not be included in those protections. When it comes to bullying, Kara insists her own bullying become a visible part of the political agenda. Community and individual identity, queer theorist Shane Phelan (1994) argues, do not exist outside of one another—instead, we concurrently shape and are shaped by our community relationships. Resisting a definition of community that seeks “common knowledges from a common identity,” Phelan points to the inherent difference of community as a necessary component of its function. “Being in common is the continual denial of community in favor of oneness,” she writes, “Community in fact works to destabilize identity, as our being with others brings us face to face with multiplicity and differences. Thus, community is not a place of refuge, of sameness, but is its opposite” (84). Writers like Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara remind me that political community benefits from a heterogeneity of voices and concerns in relation to LGBTQ+ causes, and centers those who might otherwise be excluded from a narrative of LGBTQ+ community. In their outreach to allies on the outside, however, each writer takes care to draw on the “common identity” of LGBTQ+ community in order to build shared values that include incarcerated people among LGBTQ+ people across prison walls. Andrea’Rahkayle positions the difference of incarceration as an opportunity to extend political attention to incarcerated LGBTQ+ youth (from free LGBTQ+ youth), while Kara calls attention to the similarities in struggles between free and



incarcerated trans people. Each writer must argue for the terms of her inclusion in a wider queer community by negotiating the level of “sameness” possible between incarcerated and free LGBTQ+ people—as a result, an emphasis on shared experience limits the possibilities that Phelan suggests are inherent to established queer communities.

The establishment of shared values to adjust for differences in experience and specific identity may also be a sustainable response to the already-partial relationships possible among incarcerated writers and their free audiences. In “Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community,” Jonathan Alexander (1999) writes that “identity politics has given us an imagination, perhaps even a collective consciousness of what we could be,” but that communities exist in relation to these political identities as “identifiable,” that is, a space where we “know that there are others like us” (299). Communities are made, or imagined, when we “buy into that identity,” but identity politics alone eventually fall short as a means to create community. Alexander argues that we ought to form communities and political affiliations around “shared queer values” rather than merely shared queer identities. His envisioning of queer community as a site of “self- and other- understanding” to “create and re-create” (1999, 313) community is at work in both Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara’s letters. By building a shared value system that includes and acknowledges the struggles of incarcerated LGBTQ+ people, they reveal the ways that LGBTQ+ communities outside prison are shaped by the exclusion of prisoners. Without Angrea’Rahkayle and Kara’s interventions, larger objectives within queer values might exclude prisoners by omission.

Other incarcerated writers sought to connect a shared sense of values even more expansively; in a third example, Marius’s letter opens by naming the “inspiration” and “wisdom” drawn from “bearing witness” from inside prison to both the Black Lives Matter movement and protests at Standing Rock. “It has been an inspiration to witness the Black Lives Matter movement as it confronts police brutality and to draw wisdom from that,” he begins, “it has been an inspiration to witness the federation of peoples supporting Standing Rock.” In addition to racialized political demonstrations, Marius turns a “witnessing” of refugee disenfranchisement and displacement: “And



we have borne witness,” he continues, “to the struggle for freedom and dignity of so many who have been forced to leave their homes in order to escape war, poverty and violence in the hopes of finding a more open society where they can put down roots.” By establishing himself as a “witness,” Marius takes an active position in prison by observing global political actions, and politicizes the position of confinement as a position of witnessing injustice outside prisons, rather than solely inside them. He connects the sites of political conflict (Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and the refugee crisis) explicitly to incarceration and status of LGBTQ+ prisoners:

Though, sadly, all refugees find themselves at risk of prejudice and abuse, trans people have found that they experience a unique discrimination and isolation as they cross borders, and find themselves set apart in detention centers, unable to access medical care and suffering abuse. For this reason, it is more important than ever for there to be a lively discussion possible between those who live and work on either side of the walls that separate us. By coming together and building community, by taking the time to develop connection through whatever means of communication, trans folks become less vulnerable to attack and our communities (both LGBT and straight) become stronger as we work to connect and protect each other. I want to thank all of you who wrote and who organized for supporting incarcerated trans people today. This means so much to me, that I and others like me can be supported. I find great comfort in helping support others who, like me, find themselves attempting to transition in prison.

In evoking an audience of both prisoners and nonprisoners to “build community” on “either side of the walls,” Marius establishes shared queer values of community safety (working to “connect and protect each other”). Like Andrea’Rahkayle and Kara, he hopes prisoners and their protections are included in the values shared by the LGBTQ+ community, and that incarcerated writers are positioned as active members in practicing those values. When Marius thanks nonprisoners for supporting incarcerated trans people, he too is active in that effort, saying that he “finds great comfort” in doing the same. Marius positions himself as both a recipient and facilitator of

support from readers on the outside, and reminds them that he is also doing the work. “It means so much to know that you are outside for me,” he concludes, “even as I am inside for you.”

## **“I HEAR YOU”: TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN WRITING BY/FOR PRISONERS**

For letter-writers in the *Black and Pink* newspaper, community-building includes maintaining writing connections with each other across prisons, rather than within just one institution. Family letters are most often addressed to other LGBTQ+ incarcerated people at large, revising a common representation in prison writing of the prisoner circulating textually to a world they cannot enter, while a primarily non-prisoner public audience reads, evaluates, teaches, or draws inspiration from that representative text. Rodriguez (2002) contends that “rendering such literatures of combat into realms of ‘genre,’ in spite of—or perhaps because of—the critical intent of professional (academic) intellectuals, is immediately an exercise of domestication, an immobilization of text that subjects it to a structure of enjoyment that thrives from the horror of an imprisoned Other’s suffering” (411). Letters that are by/for incarcerated writers repurpose the sharing of struggle and pain to a collective literacy practice. However, the potential for literacy connections among incarcerated people across prisons remains far more challenging than writing to or for those on the outside. In addition to prisoner-to-prisoner communication bans, incarcerated people cannot write to anyone on probation or parole in some states. Such isolating measures are deeply depoliticizing, and the moments in the family letters when incarcerated LGBTQ+ writers can connect over shared struggle subvert carceral logic. Establishing incarcerated people as members of their own readership facilitates a queer political community and is a literate act of abolitionist imagination, regardless of the political content or outcomes of those conversations.

In one example, TiffanyJoy writes explicitly to incarcerated LGBTQ+ people whose stories she has read in the newspaper: “I’m stricken with emotional pain when reading about how my brothers and sisters who are incarcerated suffer turmoil behind the walls of state prison.” Her words demonstrate an embodied empathy to others in captivity: “I cry and hurt with you,” she continues, “Trust and believe that.”

TiffanyJoy's identification with other LGBTQ+ prisoners is rooted in the common ground of incarceration, but as her letter proceeds, she notes the limits of an identification that figures difference as "glossed over" or "erased" (Ratcliffe 2005, 32). While she encourages others to continue to tell their stories, her letter regularly makes space for the varied risks inherent in writing while incarcerated. "I feel," she says, "as heart wrenching as yours/our personal stories are, it's important that you share. It's not healthy to harbor these emotions. And believe it or not what we share will help others in ways we may not understand." By using the "yours/our" pronouns, she departs from the use of "we" commonly seen in broader forms of address in the newspaper. Instead, "yours/our" closely connects her to the "turmoil" of other prisoners without taking full ownership over it, while still consciously aligning her letter to the letters of others. She suggests that an acknowledgement of differences in how each writer processes trauma is necessary for community-building. Though she ultimately believes that sharing stories is "healthy," not just for the storytellers, but for incarcerated listeners ("ways we may not understand" refrains from presuming the response of others), she balances this claim with an understanding that this action isn't for everyone. "Stories y'all share keep me motivated and give me reasons to continue being a voice for those incarcerated who choose to be silent due to the retaliation one may receive," she writes, linking those who share their stories to those who cannot. She addresses the "silent" population directly in affirmation by concluding, "That's ok, I hear you!" By indicating that she can "hear" the "silent" incarcerated readers, TiffanyJoy builds relationships among incarcerated audiences who have different aims and risks in speaking, including those who may only be reading along, rather than writing in response.

The premise that silence in the pages of the newspaper might indicate the risks incarcerated organizers bring to their writing practice persisted across letters and in the ways writers positioned themselves to each other. Ms. Bobbie, an incarcerated trans woman, discusses how silence might figure into networks where "everyone of us depend on the next sister and the information that she presents as news." She calls on writers who publish news of victories related to gender-affirmation in prison to be specific when sharing resources for incarcerated trans women. "We need more accurate information on where you come up with the information," she writes, "Like, who

did you talk to, where can they be written to, on what pages was this information? Please remember that you're addressing family that are across America and a lot of time very timid girls." Ms. Bobbie's emphasis on the reliability of sources, the "information on where you come up with the information," urges her readers to be more precise by naming the audience with parameters that indicate breadth ("family that are across America," demonstrating how universally that knowledge might be applied) and specificity ("a lot of the time very timid girls," demonstrating the unique rhetorical position trans women share in carceral facilities, where they are often housed in men's units). As an incarcerated trans woman, she notes the risks for trans women within a carceral binary-system of gender, using the word "timid" to remind readers that what is written on the page is not always enough to encourage others to speak up for themselves in the moment. "There are silent activists waiting on the information you send," she continues, "if you have information, please say something. As the poet once said, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.'" Here, Ms. Bobbie centers the work of incarcerated trans women in protecting and supporting each other, both by sharing information and, with her suggestions, improving the process by which it is shared. She hints at a wideness of the audience that exceeds what might be visible to other writers, concluding, "I assure everyone that in Texas Prisons, transgender women are very active in the cause and any help will be appreciated." Similar to TiffanyJoy's, Ms. Bobbie's letter not only writes to engage with other incarcerated people, but comments on how other writers might best respond to the dangers of writing and speaking in prison.

## **"FIRST OFF FAMILY...": SHOUT OUTS AND MUTUAL AID ACROSS PRISONS**

In addition to letters that address other prisoners directly, many letters also contain "shout outs"—brief asides to specific people, usually written in the second person. Overwhelmingly, shout outs are directed to other writer from the newspaper, though recipients can also include loved ones outside prison or in a different prison, or even fellow prisoners in the same institution. Similarly, writers would often cite another letter-writer as a reason for writing their own letter. Usually, writers did not call these motivations for writing shout outs, though occasionally a shout out would do the work of

both shouting out another writer and framing their original letter as an exigency for writing. While the shout outs varied widely in terms of timing, sometimes leaving a long gap between the publication date of the original letter and the publication of the shout out, their popularity has only persisted throughout the newspaper's publication history, indicating that the shout out is valued by incarcerated writers as a cultural practice, regardless of how sure they are that the original author hears it (newspapers might miss a reader for many reasons, especially if a change in the mailroom has occurred, the newspaper is rejected or banned, a prisoner's address changes, etc.). In a representative example of a shout out from 2017, two writers, Lance and Pretty Boi, have letters published with different objectives. Pretty Boi concludes his letter with a question: "Also does anyone know any addresses I can write to get free books or anything like LGBTQ+ self-help, educational, urban books?" In the same issue, Lance writes about recent deaths in their biological family:

Now I know I'm not the only one going through something but I really needed to vent to my LGBTQIA family about what I'm going through right now. First off I know it's hard for anybody from the LGBTQ+ to be locked up but it's really bad here in [state facility] but that's not why I need to vent. I just lost the two only people I LOVE in my family my MOM & my BROTHER and it really hurt to know I will never see them again but what is killing me right now is that I could not be there to say goodbye [...]

Lance goes on to express feelings of guilt, particularly over their brother's death, since they feel more responsibility for their sibling after the death of their parent. In a later issue, another writer, Sketch, responds to both writers via a shout out: "to Pretty Boi [...] I like what you wrote in the newsletter and I got a address that sends books to prisoners but it takes three months. And they will send you a booklet that has a lot of address for books or whatever. It even has LGBT stuff also. I hope this helps you out." In addition to supplying Pretty Boi with addresses to write for books and resources, Sketch goes on to address Lance:

Well this is my last shout out. This is to Lance S. First off family I want to say that I'm sorry to hear about your mom & brother. I

fully understand how you feel. I lost my dad to cancer and when he died I lost it. There's nothing that anyone can say at this time cause it's not of this time [...] don't blame yourself for your brother's death. It's not your fault. You know when we get busted it's hard on all our loved ones out there but it's not your fault.

Sketch's shout outs demonstrate some of the range of support I have observed incarcerated people give each other through writing. From avenues to specific items, like books and resource guides, to the response to Lance's grief, the shout out is both personal and public, a person-to-person exchange that can only exist in public form—if direct letters from one incarcerated person to another were published, the newspaper would risk being banned on a wide scale. Like TiffanyJoy, Sketch—though he says he “fully understand[s]” how Lance feels about family deaths—also acknowledges how limited understanding can be. “There's nothing anyone can say at this time cause it's not of this time” might refer to the challenge of speaking comfort to someone in mourning, but it also speaks to the out-of-time moment the shout out represents—the ability, both precious and precarious, to speak to another person who might understand. Lance writes that they need to vent specifically to “my LGBTQIA family” about biological family loss, signaling that a queer community will be able to hear their grief more intimately than others around them. Sketch affirms his own role in that community by using “first off family” in his response to Lance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Literacy scholarship has thoughtfully negotiated its place in carceral systems, framing some of the aims of prison literacy work as abolitionist in nature and acknowledging ways that curricular “complicity and regulation” affect the reading and writing experiences of incarcerated writers and students (Jacobi and Becker 2012, 36). For example, narratives of il/literacy map rather too neatly onto narratives of criminal rehabilitation and repair (Carter 2008; Branch 2007). While facilitating writing opportunities for prisoners, literacy scholars and teachers have seen abolitionist potential in prison writing workshops, classrooms, and community publications. Tobi Jacobi has theorized prison literacy endeavors as abolition work, citing university-prison partnerships as a potential “alternative

rhetorical platform for prison activists and radical prison abolitionist groups whose work and ideology remains valuable, but whose voices receive less attention in mainstream media, academic, and political landscapes” (2016, 111-2). I suggest that abolition work and ideology can also be located in ways in which relationships are formed and risked through literacy practice; I hope this contention might both reveal the ways some prison literacy practice is *already* abolition work even while it challenges me and other scholars to attend to the relationships we want—and ask—prison literacy and its circulations to build.

Black and Pink’s family letters offer insight into the possibility of LGBTQ+ abolitionist literacy practices and the tactical potential they represent in carceral systems, particularly in terms of community formations that rely on political power-building and its potential to create relationships through writing. Responding to Paula Mattieu’s contention that community partnerships disproportionately align with the university’s strategic values in engaging community spaces and populations, Paul Feigenbaum (2011) notes that prison-university partnerships “possess institutional prerogatives that also influence the work of community literacy” and that “concerns about exploitation” might focus on the ways prison institutions stand to prosper from literacy partnerships despite university representatives’ moral or political reservations (63). Feigenbaum gestures toward the conflicting political values that intersect in a university-prison partnership, but what precisely these conflicts are remains ambiguous. While the structural terms and politics of university-prison partnership may require a compromise in the values of university representatives, the practices within these partnerships can interrogate the politics of literacy practice. As prison literacy engagement becomes more prominent in public contexts, scholars of prison and community literacies might consider ways that prison-university partnerships position prisoners as a social group. How might we further position incarcerated people (across prisons) as a significant audience for prison writers? How does the circulation of writing by prisoners into free society build or foreclose on shared civic and political power?

We might continue to use our increased freedom of circulation on the outside to form relationships with each other, as scholars and practitioners of prison literacy, with the purpose of connecting not only over shared strategies and aims for effective work in and around prisons, but of connecting the incarcerated readers and writers with whom we work by exploring the prospects of writing exchanges among prisoners. We can ask incarcerated writers for their perspectives on what kinds of communication, relationship-building, and knowledge-sharing they wish to have with other prisoners, and build those perspectives into prison-based writing initiatives. Finally, we can critically examine what it means to include prisoners as members of a reading public for works by incarcerated writers. If we are motivated by a desire to adjust public misperceptions of incarcerated people, we might we consider the potential for writing by/ for prisoners as mediating internalized oppression or exceptionalism (a dominant narrative that prisoners capable of building community and writing literature are exceptions to a rule) among incarcerated people. If we are motivated by the hope that expanded circulation of prison writing might bring about change in the material realities of prisoners, whether by legal or social means, we might attune to the ways prisoners can and should be the recipients, as well as the purveyors, of political mobilization. Inside and out, our communities can thrive in a world without prisons only if we have a shared vision for transformed social relations produced by those most impacted.



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# If We Knew Our History: Building on the Insights of Past Prison Teachers

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*The future of higher education in prison remains a pressing question more than twenty years after incarcerated students were denied access to Pell grants. We are still considering questions about who should be incarcerated and why. The forces were different in the '70's and '80's, but we still have much to learn from those who labored in prison literacy classrooms in those times. This project, based on oral history interviews with six teachers who taught in writing workshops and higher education in prison programs in the 1970s and 80s, a time when prison arts, education and literacy programs were undergoing drastic shifts resulting from social, political and cultural forces, can help us understand the evolving nature of this practice. Additionally, the interviews can help us understand how these teachers' experiences of teaching in prison at a time when carceral environments were often dangerous and challenging reflect and refract the prevailing narratives of literacy at the time. As Stanton, Giles and Cruz note about their investigation into the history of service-learning, "we should build on the insights of those who have confronted these challenges before" (xiii). This project provides not only reflection on these experiences and the ways they can help us understand the past and future of literacy teaching in prison, but access to insights that are, because of the marginalized nature of this teaching, in danger of being lost to history*

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*If you know your history*

*Then you would know where you coming from*

—“*Buffalo Soldiers*,” Bob Marley

Several years ago, as I drove down the New York State Thruway on yet another Tuesday night to my writing workshop at a men’s medium-security prison, I began to wonder about how many times I had made the drive. I had started teaching writing in a college-in-prison program in 1984 and had begun the non-credit, voluntary creative writing workshop in 1995 after the college program closed due to the loss of state and federal Pell Grant funding. The math of it all defied me as I concentrated on my nighttime drive, but I began to reflect not only on my own history as a prison literacy teacher, but also on my own place in a lineage of prison writing teachers. How many others, I wondered, had made these long journeys, usually at night, to prisons in remote, usually rural locations? What was the history of these programs and the stories of the people who had taught in them?

The future of higher education in prison remains a pressing question more than 20 years after incarcerated students were denied access to Pell Grants. We are still working towards criminal justice reform with steps such as the limited restoration of the Pell Grant in 2015 through the Second Chance Pell Grant program, which provides need-based Pell Grant funding to eligible students in 65 college-in-prison programs in 15 different states (Vera Institute). The forces were different in the 1970s and 1980s, but we still have much to learn from those who labored in prison literacy classrooms in those times. This project, based on oral history interviews with teachers who taught in writing workshops and higher education in prison programs in the 1970s and ‘80s—a time when prison arts, education, and literacy programs were undergoing drastic shifts resulting from social, political, and cultural forces—can help us understand the evolving nature of this practice. As Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999) note about their investigation into the history of service-learning, “we should build on the insights of those who have confronted these challenges before” (xiii). This project provides not only reflection on these experiences and the ways they can help us understand the past and future of literacy teaching in prison, but access to insights that

are, because of the marginalized nature of this teaching, in danger of being lost to history. Prison education and literacy programs have existed in prison almost as long as there have been prisons (Silva 1994). While scholarship on prison literacy programs has increased dramatically, (Jacobi 2014; Berry 2018; Hinshaw 2018; Branch 2007; Plemons 2013), we are only beginning to examine both the history of individual prison literacy programs and the histories of the trailblazing teachers in those early programs. Additionally, these oral histories begin to provide a context, or long view, of our pedagogies and practices.

A feminist methodology can help us think about why it is important to widen our view on who teaches and where that teaching is taking place. Feminist historiographers (Hogg 2006; Royster 2008; Sinor 2002; Wood 2016) have pointed to compelling reasons to look beyond expected narratives and archives in order to call attention to marginalized voices and sites of literacy. Royster and Kirsch (2012) call for feminist rhetoricians to look at “rhetorical and literate practices in in various contexts and communities,” (32) and Glenn and Enoch (2010) suggest that “By widening the scope of the sites for our historical research, we necessarily confront new questions about and new possibilities for archival recovery, archival methods, and historiographic intervention” (18). We can draw on these ideas in order to consider other marginalized sites of literacy and sources of archival treasures, such as prisons and jails. Additionally, Glenn and Bessette call for us to pay attention to “small, local archives” such as these oral histories. As Kristen Fleckenstein (2001) notes, “we need to honor individuals’ eloquent stories as fundamental supplements to more abstract structural information and analysis as sources theoretical concepts and insights in their own right” (336). These oral histories work to honor those “eloquent stories.” Nelms (1992) points to the importance of oral histories as a method of collecting these stories, especially those “that would otherwise be lost...and giving voice to those marginalized politically, socially and professionally” (356). All of the teachers I spoke to, working on the margins of our professions in adjunct or otherwise contingent positions, had not saved any materials from their prison teaching, although all wished that they had done so. We need to circulate the voices of these teachers both to honor those who laid the foundations for many of our current practices and to investigate how these early prison

writing teachers responded to pressing social issues and forces that formed the context for their prison teaching.

Except for Patrick Berry's (2018) research on the literacy narratives of teachers in a higher-education-in-prison program, there has been little work done on the lived experiences of teachers in college-in-prison or other literacy programs other than to examine their pedagogical strategies and classroom experiences. However, as Berry states, "we would be well served by better understanding prison educators" (68). I interviewed six participants by phone, in person, and via email in order to begin to understand these past prison educators. These teachers taught in a variety of prison literacy programs such as college-in-prison programs, non-degree-granting creative writing workshops with and without formal connections to colleges or universities, and even established newspapers and literary journals edited by the incarcerated writers. Following are profiles and excerpts from conversations with those teachers who taught in various carceral sites during the 1970s and early 1980s. All except one asked to be identified by their first name only. Chris, Craig, Dave, Kirpal, Jeanne, and Rex generously shared their memories, stories, and thoughts on the past and future of literacy education in prison.

Silva (1994) notes that the availability of Pell Grants to incarcerated students after 1965 was responsible for the proliferation of post-secondary programs in prisons in which myself, Craig, and Kirpal taught. The rapid growth of college-in-prison programs in the 1960s and '70s coincided with the Civil Rights Movement and other progressive social movements of which participants such as Chris were a part. Bernstein (2010) discusses how the conflicts in American prisons during the 1970s gave rise to the growing prison arts movement at the time. Bernstein also notes the dismantling of many of these programs in the 1980s, when prison became "a flashpoint for a society in transition" (95) reflected in the changes that Chris, Craig, and Dave observed.

## **CHRIS**

Chris is an activist, author of nine published volumes of poetry, and professor at Bucks County Community College. His poetry collection, *Cell Count*, reflects his experience of teaching creative

writing classes in a Bucks County, Pennsylvania jail beginning in the mid-1970s. Chris continued teaching in jails for 30 years. Chris has a long history of social activism as he has worked as a probation counselor, volunteered at a women's shelter, and advocated for the rights of the homeless and farm workers.

Chris noted that a sense of "identifying with the oppressed" brought him to teaching writing in jails and volunteered that his mother had been institutionalized when he was a child, which provided him with a sense of "solidarity with the oppressed." When I asked Chris if he would identify himself as a "political activist," he replied that "when I had my first child and my friend went off to Viet Nam, I became involved in the peace movement."

Chris began teaching in a program in a Quaker jail outside of Philadelphia that had "a lot of citizen involvement." This jail, was, according to Chris, a "remarkable old jail," where the cells were so small "you had to bend your head down to go into the cell." The jail offered a large number of programs staffed by a cross-section of community members. Chris noted the change in the jail's attitude towards community involvement in the 1980s, saying:

And then of course Reagan came along and the 1980s came along and the new jail came along, but at the time the new jail was built the old jail cells that were meant to house one or two people housed five, six people in one cell, so it was bursting at the seams. The new jail was a whole other animal. The numbers of incarcerated bloomed, not only the numbers but the attitude towards community involvement changed and community programs were much more curtailed. The county commissioners didn't like the idea of tax money being spent on inmates.

Chris's prison teaching changed him both as a person and as a teacher. Chris reflected:

"The more people I worked with, the more I became aware of my own naivety, and aware of the limitations of what could be done. It was learning on the job; it helped that the program said, you're



not to come in with an agenda; you're not here to save these guys. You're not here to bring Jesus into the jail. You're here to help them explore, to develop their thinking skills, to open themselves up to possibilities; in other words, to do exactly what you do in your job as a teacher in your job in the community college. I began to realize that this was not going to change any of these lives and that what I could do was create an environment where they were thinking, they were as much fully themselves as they could be... to make that time a meaningful time in a day that wasn't very meaningful. It seemed the same process where ever one is, and the pleasure and the great thing in teaching writing is the privilege of getting inside people's lives and experiences. People will write about stuff they would never talk about, and that's just breathtaking.

## **CRAIG**

Craig is also a published poet and has been a writing teacher in the educational opportunity program at the State University of New York at Albany for over 30 years. Craig taught developmental and first-year writing as well as literature in the same college-in-prison program I taught in, for over 10 years beginning in the early 1980s. Like Chris, Craig similarly identified himself as a "child of the sixties" and as someone who grew up with a sense of injustice and denied opportunities. Craig cited his adolescence in the "blue collar" town of Paulsboro, New Jersey as an important factor in his social awareness. He stated that he had a keen sense that "our culture's been less than fair to people." In addition to his awareness of poverty and social inequity, Craig, like Chris, cited the social atmosphere of the 1960s and '70s as an important factor in his decision to teach in prisons. Craig stated:

I think the other part of it was coming of age in the '60s; I didn't think the prisoners were just evil and the rest of us were just innocent. Not that I was totally naïve ...Attica was in the news; I mean, you hang out in the '60s or even the '70s and you can't go to a party without taking drugs, so am I supposed to feel that the people who were arrested for drugs are criminals and the people who were recreationally getting high are not?

Craig also commented on how the changing social and political climate of the times ultimately ended the college-in-prison program in which he taught:

I think even the college itself had a lot of nice things to say about helping people out and community values and so on, but they were making a fair amount of money on that program and the students paid for it on the basis of tuition assistance from TAP, which is the New York state program, and Pell, which is the federal program. Given the politics of the '90s, that support disappeared, and as soon as that support disappeared, the college pulled out. The attitude of the time was “why should taxpayers be paying for college-in-prison, so convicted prisoners get it for free?”

Craig reflected on the reason why people might be attracted to teaching in prison:

You see people going into prison teaching and you see that there is something esoteric about it that attracts them because you're coming into contact with people that are marginalized by society—they're dangerous, and there's something attractive about that. In the second stage of teacher development, according to Mina Shaughnessy's "Diving In," the person positions themselves as a savior. I'm sure I went through that myself in earlier stages because it's something you feel proud of, you're doing something heroic, and in instances in which the inmate is responding, you can pat yourself on the back as a kind of savior. So I would say that the advice would be to just to think about what you're doing and why you're doing it. If you can't question your own motives and laugh at yourself a little bit and also take responsibility for if in fact you are trying to save human lives—don't do that. Don't just go in there and make yourself a hero and write about it and walk away from the terrible realities that seem to continue.

## **DAVE**

Dave is unique in that he is a formerly incarcerated writer whose involvement in Richard Shelton's workshop at Arizona State

Penitentiary led to a prolific writing and academic career. After Dave's release from prison, beginning in 1977, he directed multiple workshops in prisons and jails in Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Dave also taught high school in Colorado, was invited to participate in the Tao Center For Creativity, and also worked with underserved communities under the auspices of the Western States Arts Council as well as the National Endowment for the Arts.

Dave explained that Shelton's encouragement was influential in his development as a writer and teacher. He remembered:

Shelton had all of these books on his shelf, and I said "This is great, wonderful." I started reading them, and I tried my hand at some of them. I tried a narrative poem and I tried a sonnet. Shelton said "you should try and come to some of the workshop sessions."

Dave became one of the organizers of the workshop at a prison in Florence, Arizona that brought writers from racial and ethnic groups that typically did not associate with one another together. Dave explained that "we reached an agreement that anyone who wanted could go to the workshop. That was remarkable because that hadn't happened at the prison up until that time. And that was when Shelton and I became really good friends and I became the co-organizer of the workshop."

Dave also noticed changes in attitudes towards programing over the years:

They're just looking for an excuse to shut down these rehabilitation programs. I think that's the biggest change I've noticed; in '76, although there was a lot of violence and stuff, there was still a strong voice that believed that rehabilitation was possible. With the change in the drug laws and the increased population in prison, it became more just like "lock 'em down and forget about it." Rehabilitation is not going to be a major force in corrections. It's become more difficult to get into a lot of prisons, to have a voice to get an interview to talk about a program

with the warden, who will probably just say “oh, no, we’re not interested in that. It takes too many people to supervise.” So that’s the main thing I’ve noticed.

## **JEANNE**

Jeanne is a published poet and professor of creative writing and coordinator of the creative writing program at California State University at Chico. Jeanne first taught a creative writing class at a women’s prison in Arizona in 1977. She grew up in “a small industrial farm refinery town in Ohio” where there was a prison and noted that the presence of the prison in the community was a strong influence and an intriguing presence in her everyday life. Jeanne stated that “...it was kind of big on the horizon; I have a poem in my first book that describes driving by there going to the swim club every day and seeing prisoners out in the fields. It was kind of this large spectral figure in my life growing up.”

After she left Arizona, Jeanne began teaching at this prison. Like the other interviewees, Jeanne’s interest and involvement with social movements of the times—in her case, feminism—influenced her decision to teach in prison. Jeanne explained:

I was very interested in their lives and the stories they had to tell. So that was kind of a fit for me; I was very keen to work with women on their writing, so keen to work with prisoners and...to get my feet wet as a writer in a community setting.

Jeanne also realized the complex humanity of her students:

Well, I was a new mother when I first started. I remember a woman named Mary who started writing about being away from her children. I was devastated. I was absolutely devastated, and I looked at her and any assumptions about her I could make or did make about who these people were went right out the window. She was well-educated, articulate, and she could have been anybody I went to school with. I realized there wasn’t so much difference between the women I was working with and the women I went to school with. And the level of vulnerability was quite something.

## KIRPAL

Kirpal, a poet and writer, spoken word artist, and currently a writing teacher at Hofstra University, began teaching in prisons in Arizona around 1976 when he taught in Richard Shelton's workshop in Arizona State Prison in Florence. Kirpal also identified his involvement with various political and ideological movements of the 1960s and '70s as foundational to his prison teaching. In addition to his teaching in the workshop at Florence, Kirpal taught at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility in Staten Island, New York from 1982-89, where he taught a number of literacy classes, coordinated various programs, founded and published a prison newspaper, *The Arthur Kill Alliance*, and established *Empire!*, a statewide publication of work from writers incarcerated in New York state.

Kirpal perceives his educational experiences as important to his sense of social justice. In high school, for example, he "refused Advanced Placement on the grounds that this was undemocratic and un-Whitman-like...the competitive class ranking, the National Honor Society, the whole idea that this education was for getting ahead instead of sharing wisdom seemed like a sad joke perpetrated on the unknowing and the insecure and the obedient." Kirpal also cited his undergraduate work at the then-experimental Fordham University, his experience living in a yoga ashram, and his studies at the Naropa Institute with poets such as Allen Ginsberg as important to his openness to the marginal and the innovative. Kirpal brought his unique background as a poet grounded in the Beat movement and the lineage of yoga to his prison teaching.

Kirpal, like Chris, learned that he could not impose an agenda on his students:

So I learned that so much of the work was meeting them on their own terms. My door was open whether I was there or not, and my door stayed open even when I moved around the jail. This one dude was mopping this little area. This was the thing that really changed me. A remarkable guy named Henry and the other Rastas said "dude, you gotta lighten up."

“I’m the teacher,” I said.

“No, that dude mopping that hall that you think needs an education and that you think needs to elevate himself, make his game and make his time work, that’s all this dude’s got. That dude never had nothing. The only thing he’s got for his manhood is the chance to keep this little neck of the floor clean. You try to take that from him, what’s up?”

I said “You win, you’re right. That’s a hole in my bucket. My game is that we should do this, and that we should help one another do this, and you’re all right to point out that that dude has every right to clean that floor.”

This was a transformational moment for Kirpal.

## **REX**

Rex, a professor of writing and medical humanities at St. Cloud’s University, also taught in Shelton’s workshop at Arizona State Prison, while he was a graduate student in the Arizona State University MFA program. Rex names the strong sense of place inherent in the Southwest setting as part of his motivation to teach in prison. Rex commented that, “I had been involved with indigenous communities off and on, and more than I knew, I think that influenced me. There’s something about the Chicano environment that is indigenous and political.” Rex brought the teaching that he did with indigenous communities in Arizona to his prison work:

I worked up on the Apache reservation and with the Hopi, and it seemed as though working with indigenous people reverberated with my experiences in the prison... I walked into different environments with people who had good reason to be suspicious of me. And so I welcomed that.

Rex also remarked on the materially dangerous conditions in the Arizona State Penitentiary, the site of several deadly riots in the ‘70s:

The workshop was sort of buried in the bowels of the prison. While I was there, there were knifings. Because of my lack of experience, I assumed that this was the norm for all prisons, but I since then I learned that Florence was one of the most violent places in the country.

Rex reflected on negative treatment from the corrections officers who “were belittling and pretty much bullied everybody, and the tone carried through the whole prison. They also deliberately suggested that you weren’t going to be able to get out.” Rex also reflected on the effect this environment had on him:

I actually stopped going in to teach in prison when one of my classes sat me down and said, “You’ve been in prison, haven’t you?”

And I responded: “No, what do you mean?”

“Well, you’re always looking for a way to get out of here.”

Rex notes the trauma of teaching inside the violent, hostile carceral atmosphere.

Like Craig and Chris, Rex learned about his students and himself as he realized that his incarcerated students were the experts on their own lives.:

The first thing I knew is that I didn’t know a hell of a lot about their lives or what was going on, and I wasn’t about to tell them. And the nice thing about a writing workshop is that they get to tell you. You’re not in there to lecture about them. So I think those lessons about a teacher’s place have carried over into everything I do.

This is difficult work, indeed, as Craig notes, but it is heartening that 40 years later we have online communities, conference presentations, and workshops that provide a forum for us to talk with each other and

share the difficulties, rewards, triumphs, and traumas of literacy work in prison. It is heartening as well that members of this community have taken Craig's admonition to not walk "away from the terrible realities that seem to continue" by carrying on the legacy of these teachers who walked into often dangerous situations without much, if any, preparation or training. While there is increased support and available resources for prison literacy educators and prison reform has become a national discussion, we know all too well that decades later, these programs are still vulnerable and subject to prevailing political climates, public attitudes towards crime and incarceration and the decisions of current administrations. What also remains constant is our need to pay attention to the histories of these programs and the people who taught in them.

As I reflected on my conversations with these six teachers, I was struck by the variety of backgrounds they brought to their prison literacy teaching as well as the many kinds of prison literacy programs they taught in or established. These instructors currently teach at a variety of sites ranging from community colleges to four-year colleges to Higher Educational Opportunity programs. All of them are published poets, and some, such as Jeanne, identify themselves primarily as poets and creative writers. Only Craig brought an extensive background in writing studies to his work with incarcerated writers. The programs they taught in—which range from the credit-bearing college program Craig taught in, to the non-credit creative writing workshops Chris, Rex, and Jeanne taught in, to the work Kirpal did with the writers and editors of a prison newspaper and literary magazine—afforded these teachers multiple ways to interact with their incarcerated students, who wrote in a variety of genres such as formal papers for developmental and first-year writing college courses, poems produced in creative writing workshops, and newspaper articles and editorials.

We might consider the range of backgrounds these teachers brought to their writing as well as the variety of programs and kinds of writing represented in these oral histories in order to reflect on whether or not we are considering such an array of programs and genres of writing in our current research. Even a cursory glance at a national directory of higher education in prison programs



compiled by Rebecca Ginsburg (Bryan and Ginsburg 2016) and Education Justice Project volunteers reveals an intriguing array of programs from Second Chance Pell Grant-funded credit-bearing post-secondary programs, to certificate programs, book groups, non-credit-bearing creative writing workshops, to theater, music, and ministerial programs. Many of these programs continue the legacy established by early programs such as Richard Sheldon's workshop at the Arizona State Penitentiary that Kirpal, Rex, and Dave taught in, or the classes taught by community volunteers such as Chris in Pennsylvania. Surely the teachers and volunteers staffing this array of programs bring a diversity of backgrounds and experiences to their work. Is our current research reflecting the depth and breadth of the current programs and the kinds of writing being produced by the incarcerated writers and students in these programs? While the restoration of Pell Grants and the expansion of post-secondary programs in prison is of vital importance, in reality, such programs will be available to a minority of incarcerated people; non-credit-bearing programs such as creative writing workshops and book groups afford additional literacy opportunities. Are we considering the diverse backgrounds that prison literacy teachers bring to their work in our research, or are we focusing on those of us in academia who teach in college-in-prison programs? As these interviews demonstrate, we can benefit from the experiences of teachers with diverse backgrounds who teach in many different types of programs.

Current archival projects at carceral sites such as the Indiana State Women's Prison, San Quentin, the Washington State Prison History Project, and the work of the Prison Public Memory Project in New York and Illinois call attention to the importance of this work, which is only beginning. Additional archival work can focus on the experiences of our predecessors, who taught in challenging or often dangerous situations, who often brought a strong awareness of the place of prisons in the community and a complex awareness of their own motivations for teaching in prison. We need to begin to archive our own work, narratives, and materials, so our voices, experiences, and programs are not in danger of being lost to history; will we regret, like these teachers, that we have not archived or saved any materials or records from our current programs?

Berry (2018), in his study of literacy teachers in a higher education-in-prison program, reminds us that “Too often prison education research focuses solely on what the teacher (or program) gives the student- whether content knowledge...a voice, or a space to write and learn...I argue that teachers need to be part of the frame of college-in-prison programs.” (69). These oral histories support Berry’s claim and remind us that we need to continue to include teachers’ voices and experiences in our research. Lockard (2018) observes that there are many reasons that people teach in prison and notes that “our responses to this question will change over time and with teaching experience, for there is no one definitive answer. What is important is that we continue to ask questions of ourselves and find motivation in renewed responses” (25). The oral histories attest to the multiple and complex reasons these teachers had for teaching in challenging and even dangerous situations.

These interviews also call attention to such issues that are relevant to the future of our programs—such as the trauma Rex notes that he experienced as a result of teaching in the violent environment of Arizona State Penitentiary—an issue that our field is only beginning to explore (Jacobi and Roberts 2016). Additionally, Kirpal, Rex, and Chris reflect on the importance of listening to our incarcerated students and taking care not to impose our agenda on them; while we are beginning to include the voices of the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated in our conferences and publications, we need to continue this trend and monitor our reasons for teaching in prison.

Kirsch and Royster (2010), in their call for us to engage in feminist rhetorical practices, note that this approach “calls for work that is not merely analytical but embodied, grounded in the communities from which it emanates and deeply rooted in the traditions we feel obligated to honor and carry forward” (659). The reflections of these teachers will honor those traditions and help us move forward as we reflect on our own motivations for teaching in prison, the needs and concerns of our incarcerated students, and the history we are already creating.

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# Haunt(ed/ing) Genealogies and Literacies

Romeo García

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*The article centers on haunting genealogies and literacies. It asks the question, what lurks in the beyond and that is already present in and around? Working at the tension between inheritances and responsibility, I argue that a framework of hauntings invites a modality of a different kind of “scholar.” It calls for a careful reckoning, prompting an ethical injunction, one that demands of the “scholar” to learn how to address oneself to and work towards becoming a scholar of hauntings. Throughout, I assert that future without a place for hauntings is like a responsibility absent of a careful reckoning. The article concludes with a final question, “Are we ready to be a different kind of scholar?”*

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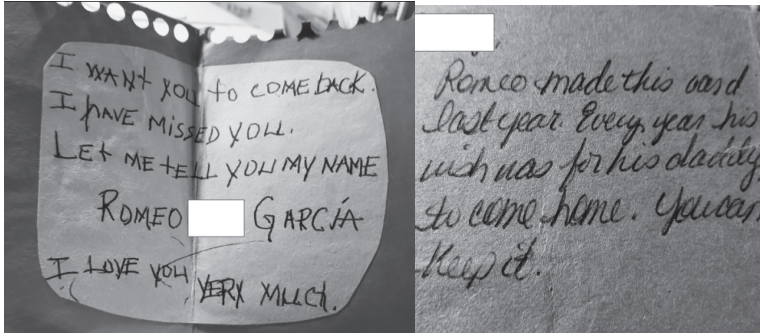


Figure 1: A Card to Him

The words above and to the left are mine, written when I was five years old to a man I only ever knew through letters and pictures until I was in high school. His absence had an effect on me, an obstinate child whose compulsion was to love and feel loved. For instance, the wistful sentiment, “I have missed you,” alongside the coupling of words, “I want you to come back,” gives the impression he once was present. But if we turn to the image on the right, my mom provides five years of perspective: “Every year his wish was for his daddy to come home.” The impact of his absence is illustrated then in the above narrative forged out of a fallacious nostalgic sentimentality since, ironically, I never had him in my presence. The most haunting indication of his effect is captured by my remark, “Let me tell you my name.” The fantasy in the two statements, “I have missed you” and “I want you to come back,” unravels both when I have to ask in one of my letters to him “Are you my daddy?” and with the desideratum of having to record my name in the card above: Romeo García.

What’s in a name? A name is both given and received, like an inheritance of sorts. One of the most important lessons I have learned is that despite the desire to remove or detach the self from a given and received name, something is already at work in it; a name can so often be a reminder of what hauntingly lurks in the beyond and what is already present in and around. I am reminded of Shakespeare’s Romeo who utters, “Henceforth I never will be Romeo” (II.I). He knows a name received, like a body arranged for the coming of the self cannot be given up. Still, Romeo utters the words, “I’ll be new baptized” (II.I.), imagining the possibilities of new stories. What’s in

a name? For some, like Romeo who acknowledges he hosts a haunting, a name carries stories of haunting genealogies and literacies that cannot be put to rest and that demand a careful reckoning. And while Romeo dies with that name, unable to solve how to represent hope without death, his utterance attempts to epistemically disobey the given inheritance and epistemically de-link the given name and self. By learning how to address himself to hauntings he becomes part of a living thread of hope, possibilities, and openings. This essay is partly about inheritances; selecting and reading them and interpreting and addressing oneself to them. Part of my inheritance came to me through letters from him, and my signature on them was always a reminder that something is already at work in a name.

Prison letters and cards made up my earliest recollections of literacy development, reaffirming my haunt(ed/ing) genealogies. This concerned my mom. To her, William Wordsworth would be correct in saying, “The world is too much with us” (n.p.). Something was already present, hauntingly lurking in the beyond. As one of a people on the cusp of invisibility, my mom encouraged me to learn how to listen to haunting literacies and how to live, otherwise, in this space of hauntings; I was born to a single mother with little education and raised in a low-income household in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) where poverty, “illiteracy,” and low educational attainment are recycled stories of the hopeful. Grown-folk literacies included words from my mom (“I was not given a manual for how to raise a child.” | “Ni modo, así son las cosas.” | “¡Vergüenza! Embarrassed is when you steal”) and ongoing letters from him (“I don’t love your mom.” | “Don’t be a fuck up like me!” | “Prison is hell.”). If we are, as Judy Rohrer (2016) argues, the “set of stories we tell ourselves, the stories that tell us, the stories others tell about,” and if stories have “structural underpinnings” and “material consequences” (189), what worried my mom was the impending threat of me becoming part of recycled stories in the LRGV. Teaching me how to be a scholar of hauntings was her intervention into my life story.

This essay invokes hauntings as a framework. Hauntings gesture to that which I could not see, but that stained and cohabited my memory and body and staged my inheritance; that I so hauntingly saw in the image of him, and like a secret, I didn’t want it to come



to light, seeking to conjure it away from my self. But if the insignia of a haunting is the concomitant of past, present, and future, it will surreptitiously return at the threshold of my self. I continue to know this haunting as I traverse Gringodemia and am lost in translations and deictics: “The Mexican,” who is not of this world and time. Hauntings are not foreign to the racialized and minoritized, inculcating us in a foreign language, thought, and politics (of memory, listening, inheritances) in the face of the historicization of the given. Hauntings force us to be a different kind of “scholar,” the kind hoped for in Hamlet: “Thou art a scholar, speak to it...” (I.I, also see Derrida 1994). Our learning how to unlearn process (epistemic de-linking and disobedience) begins with learning how to address ourselves to hauntings. The failure to recognize hauntings is the biggest difference I see between the scholar of hauntings and the lost savants of the academy. This difference is what drives this discussion on hauntings—and responsibility.

The first part of this essay is dedicated to my own hauntings. Hauntings would seem to suggest a primordial preeminence toward which we are to bend and obey without question, a given, a *subject of* rather than a scholar of hauntings; a being that is a given. Situated between *a priori* of a given being and the possibilities of new stories, I invoke hauntings because they capture a reference point or a threshold for which I have understood my self in place(s) and time(s) in polylog with past selves and others. I also invoke hauntings to contribute to a wrinkle within the excess of the given and to re-think the haunt as a concept for staging the limits of the given. How, though, do we begin to betray that which we receive and commence to re-think the debt of an inheritance in the face of historicization that masquerades as a given? For me, it is through writing and scholarship. Romeo’s words, “I’ll be new baptized” (II.I.), resonate because they attempt to betray the conscript of the given, they dissent against its rhetoric and carve out a place of possibilities and openings of meaning with and from haunting literacies, discourses, and politics: a modality of a different kind of “scholar.” I write to be part of this living thread of hope.

The second part of this essay is for the academic scholar who inherits an intellectual tradition that is also haunted by that which lurks in the beyond and already present—a tradition, however, that is reluctant

to speak the foreign language of the scholar of hauntings. What haunts this scholar is the pretext of a gift: “What the one does not have, what the one therefore does not have to give away” (Derrida 31). For those who work within the contexts of prison literacies at the intersection of writing and rhetorical studies (WRS), at stake in working with those who cannot be heard and seen in and on their own terms is the translation of a self and narrative that is predicated upon a presupposition that it is possible to hear and see those “inside”: a structure of thought and feeling and praxis historically associated with the extraction of knowledge masquerading as gifts of responsibility and justice to the world. If hauntings are not a given, for “if the readability of a legacy were given...we would never have anything to inherit from it” (Derrida 1994, 18), and, if we “always inherit from a secret,” which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so?” (18), how might hauntings intervene as an ethical injunction, as a call to action for academic scholars to partake in a careful reckoning with what haunts them? This I tease out for a field that extracts from and imposes unto others’ the gift of knowledge.

## HAUNTING GENEALOGIES AND GROWN-FOLK LITERACIES

Mom moved us to Skyline on Grimes Apartments when I was five. The move represented a story of hope, the possibility of new stories. But while it was not the *colonias* or the *barrio* that my mom, *tío/tías*, and grandma lived in, the *colonias* and *barrio* had followed; the beyond was already present. Other single mothers who had the same hope moved into Skyline. So, imagine, a section of the apartment complex in which the children came together because they shared a common story-so-far that centered in and around single-parents, a low-income household, haunt(ed/ing) genealogies, and grown-folk literacies. Our mothers, whose similar hope ran together, befriended each other. And so, as kids we stood in lines with one another in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (W.I.C.) buildings, attended each other’s birthday parties, kicked it, and consoled each other. We grew up to be *traviosos* or *caga palos*. The toll was already heavy because so many in the LRGV do not “make it out.” It did not help that we were living in the image of those in the beyond: our fathers in prison. While Skyline on Grimes represented a story of hope, because it was physically separate from the *colonias* and *barrios*, the cycle of struggle persisted alongside

a *colonia* and *barrio* mentality. Perhaps for no other reason did our mothers struggle with the decision to allow us to read prison letters.

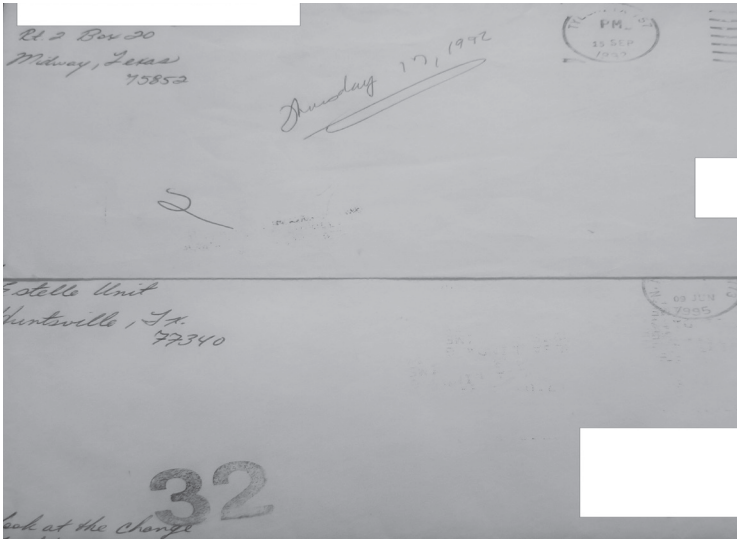


Figure 2: Letters From Different Units

Some children learn about unfamiliar places in the beyond through books, while others, like me, encountered them in prison letters. My earliest memories of reading letters from him started at around five. There were always two letters. Every few months they would come in. Some years they had postage from different places in Texas: Midway, Huntsville, and Gatesville. I'd ask mom to take me to check the mail persistently. I wanted to see those two letters when we'd open the mailbox. They only ever came every few months though. When they did come, I knew what followed. We'd go back to the apartment and sit at the table. Mom would open hers first. I'd sit there patiently waiting, thinking about how he'd respond to my last letter. I always asked a lot of questions. She hardly showed any expression, except for in those times she thought I was too preoccupied with my letter. Mom perhaps felt she needed to remain strong for me. So often, though, I would find her wiping away a tear when my letter was up in my face.

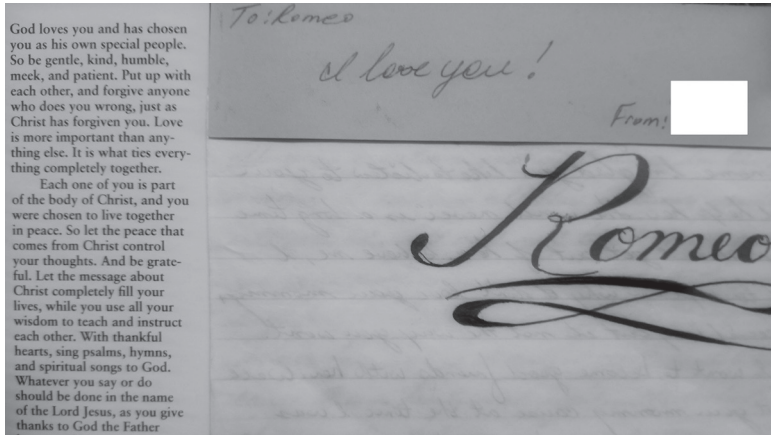


Figure 3: Calligraphy and Bookmark

Mom would hand me my letter. I'd open it up slowly. I'd take out the drawing first. Typically, it was my name or some words in calligraphy with an "I love you" at a corner of a homemade bookmark. The bookmarks sometimes had biblical scriptures on them with a note: "I never knew HIM, but now that HE is in my life, I know I can get through it all." This was a too-often-rehearsed line for us at Skyline on Grimes. The actual letter I saved for last. He was never shy to tell me how it was. In one letter he wrote: "You asked me if I love your mom! Well I can't really say I do! It takes love to be with someone and I don't have that for her." In another he stated, "So you want to know where I am and why I am there? Even though you might not understand everything at this moment in your life, I want to be real with you, I am in prison for doing bad things." He took time, perhaps because time is all he had, to explain to me, hoping, perhaps, that I could indeed understand. I understood the letters as haunting signifiers.

Through his letters, I learned about choices and consequences, selecting good and bad friends, and I learned how to translate meaning from the malaise of secrets. He never blamed being in prison on anyone else except for himself. In one letter he stated, "I was a bad person who robbed, cheated, and hurt people." I understood what all three of those things meant at the time. I stole baseball cards, which mom made me return. I observed undocumented people cheated of humanity, and I bore witness to the emotion of pain and sorrow

with my mom. In other letters, he expressed hope inculcated in the sentimentalities of despair and tragedy. His hope was for me not to be like him:

So next year you'll be in kindergarten huh? Wow! In your last letter you asked a lot of questions. I am going to answer your questions and tell you the truth about everything. I tell you things, I share with you my past experiences, so that you will not make the same mistakes.

I wasn't no good, growing up and now. My priorities were messed up. I was foolish, dumb, and those dumb things got me in prison. I hurt everyone around me. The problem has and continues to be me.

I have some recommendations for you. Stay in school. Education is very important. Never quit!! Remember, everyone gets friends until they mess up. Be careful as you pick friends. Always respect your mom. She has gone through a lot to make it in life and to provide for you. I will rely on your mother to explain all this in terms you'll understand.

I understand that when you get older you might not find it in you to forgive, more less, to love a man who wasn't there. If you make such a decision, I am ready to accept it.

I understood his cautionary anecdotes that reverberated in the words I heard so often from my mom, "I don't want you to grow up to be like me." If I couldn't be like them, although I was already part of their story, who could I be like? It was always an objectified something—a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer. It was never an actual person, much less a person who shared a similar story that of the LRGV. I struggled then with imagining the possibilities of new stories without knowing who to be other than what I was haunted by.

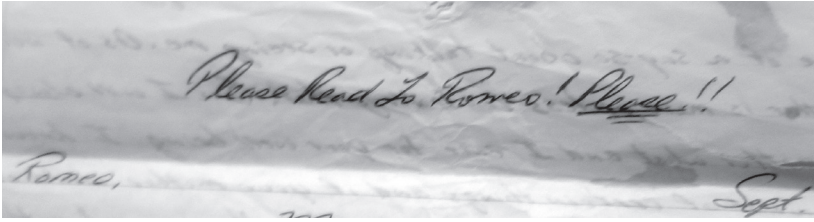


Figure 4: *A Letter: "Please Read to Romeo! Please!!"*

My mom sometimes stopped communication between him and me (Figure 4). But that didn't last. She then would ask me to throw away his letters after reading them, as if dispossessing of them would keep that which lurked in the beyond—and yet present in and around me—away. Somehow, I managed to convince her to let me take them out to the dumpster on my own. Walking towards the dumpster, I'd quickly fold them up, hide them in my sock, and wait till bedtime to take them out. I choose to keep those letters. They were a part of me; I was them. Then, and throughout the years that proved to be difficult for me, I'd turn to them, reading, dissecting, and interpreting them. The words, for me, were not static, and they manifested in meaning with time and learning how to read with care. Soon, the question of "what haunts?" transformed into actional thoughts: how do I live, otherwise?

Late at night, I would open my notebook and write about stories-so-far and the possibilities of new stories. I wrote and I wrote for many nights. And today I am reminded of what Marcellus said to Horatio in Hamlet: "Thou art a scholar, speak to it" (I.I). According to Derrida (1994), this scene is calling on Horatio to select, interpret, and orient himself to a ghost (13). This passage transports me back to my youth, where I learned how to be a scholar of hauntings and ghosts. Every night I still write, feeling the aches caused by carrying the burden of what haunts me still. And I wonder, both about how many scholars in the academy acknowledge hauntings and how our understanding of responsibility is fraught because of an unacknowledgment of them?

Predictably, scholars in the academy do not take the position to speak of or on hauntings. Their privilege is not having to address oneself to hauntings. And consequentially, this leads to a responsibility and a translation of it that is purely academic. Problematic is how the

academic scholar stages the word *responsibility*, both managing and controlling the idea of it and arranging the conditions for which to deliver responsibility as a gift. Herein lies the indelible lessons of hauntology and a de-colonial option. A future without a place for hauntings is like a responsibility absent of a careful reckoning. Responsibility (and inheritance) is what is at stake here and what guides the remainder of this discussion. Below I review three articles on prison literacy work. I offer no solutions but rather a hope that we can begin to talk about and incorporate a language of more hauntings.

## THE SECRECY OF THE SECRET

Something haunts the lost savant of the academy. Their intellectual enterprise of inquiry takes them to places and allows them to enter spaces to engage in comprehensive study. There is no doubt that prison literacies are an important site of inquiry. Today, there are studies on prison activism (Hartnett et al. 2013; Torre and Fine 2005) and prison participatory action research (Halkovic 2014), inquiries into the impact that literacy and rhetorical work can have on the incarcerated (Rose 2012), and investigations into hope and despair in prison poetry (Hartnett 2003) and literacy narratives (Berry 2014). Literacy culture in prisons, it is argued, can be of benefit to the academy (see Franklin 2008; Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 2018; Jacobi and Stanford 2014; Winn 2011). In fact, scholars have encouraged stronger ties between institutions of higher education and the incarcerated (Jacobi 2008; Kerr 2004). I wonder, however, about what haunts the literacy educator, both as they work with folks in the “inside” and attempt to hear and see (sound-sight materiality) them in and on their own terms. How might a framework of hauntings and a de-colonial option serve as an ethical injunction for literacy educators, demanding of them to address themselves to inheritances and hauntings and re-think a politics of responsibility?

Listening is important in all human exchange. In “Writing to Listen,” Wendy Hinshaw (2018) draws upon Krista Ratcliffe (2005) to foreground her prison-university writing exchange program. Built around Ratcliffe’s definition (and premise) for rhetorical listening and dialogue between university students and writers in prison, Hinshaw (2018) proclaims that rhetorical listening provides



a productive framework for thinking about the “absences that we are left to listen into” and for “situating ourselves within our partnership” and “identifying ourselves within systems and conditions of criminal injustice” (56). The writing exchange, she notes, provided the “means for noticing, visualizing identification...creating a stance of openness from which to listen to experiences and identifications... and examining the power differentials that shape them” (59). Hinshaw draws upon feminist rhetorical methods to develop the possibility to hear and see those in the inside. She speaks though with a rhetoric of certainty without ever coming to grips with hauntings.

The methodological grounds by which prison rhetorical work is undertaken creates an impasse. While Hinshaw sources strategic contemplation, ironically, she never attends to the non-present present—hauntings nor specters. And that is just one of the limitations of rhetorical listening. Another is that it attempts to solve the colonial problem it created, resulting in a double movement—white guilt and white privilege. My objection is not with practicing listening to cultivate exchange, nor is it with listening to disentangle preconceived notions of where and how literacies circulate. Rather, my dissent is against the very exigency from which rhetorical listening is thought and carried out: (1) white guilt, “listening is rarely theorized or taught” (Ratcliffe 2005, 18) and (2) white privilege, listening should be revived as a “code of cross-cultural conduct” (17). Following the logic, the former statement is an exhortation of the kind of stories white academic “scholars” tell themselves, while the latter reflects the means by which that logic is able to traffic in the normative masquerading as gifts of responsibility. In addition, problematic with Hinshaw’s argument that it is possible to “tune” into the “material conditions of speaking and writing” (57) is that it remains attached to haunting legacies of seeing and hearing the “other” in and on the academic scholars’ terms.

Rhetorical listening is haunted by a colonial memory. The asymmetrical relationship between those who give from the inside and those who receive from the other side of the razor wire is most apparent in Malcolm X’s (1965) poignant observation: “Many who today hear me...think I went to school far beyond the either grade” (354). Strikingly, I am reminded of Hinshaw’s (2018) students



and a haunting passage that captures the privilege of composing environments, wherein she writes that it “made the materiality of these sites harder to hear” (64). Perhaps not intended to read this way, I argue the impasse of hearing and seeing in the passages of giving and receiving is accentuated due in part because her students cannot hear those inside, much less “tune their ears” to their voice. We cannot not assume engagement and “agreement” procures “common ground” or that providing “glimpses of themselves” infers comprehension (60). All this presupposes that the translation of the “experience of incarceration” (58) does not keep its secret even as it emerges as text meant to be seen, read, and heard. While the give-and-receive relationship is fraught, I am reminded of the importance of hauntings. What haunts the educator who believes and the student who purchases that belief that the penitentiary can benefit them?

Scholars in WRS remain interested in prison literacies. Indeed, some have taken up the sentiments of H. Bruce Franklin (2008), who asserts that “the penitentiary can help the academy learn how to read” (648). Like Hinshaw, he is captivated by the “sound” created by those inside. He turns to Jimmy Santiago Baca’s work, which eventually represents for him a “wonderful” corpus of literature worth keeping (a “keeper”). Baca’s work and life, Franklin notes, is a “thrilling testimonial to the power of literacy and language” (644). According to Franklin, Baca, like others mentioned, forces us “to view incarceration, social justice, and literacy from the bottom up instead of from the top down” (648) and reflect the potential to turn people into readers (647). But how are ordinary people supposed to be able to access such work written out of a place where all hope is gone and where the self must be reinvented? Franklin assures us some of his students are indeed able to “read,” “see,” and even “smell” that which was given to them (647). But these cannot be typical students because that connection stems with knowing how to read and listen with care and with having already reckoned with hauntings.

So, what can the penitentiary teach the academy? In “Doing Time with Literacy Narratives,” Patrick Berry (2014) makes note of a disparity in competing notions of literacy and what it can do (138). He provides an account of fourteen men in a writing class at a medium-high-security prison. Berry’s overall interest in the

piece deals with the complex nature of literacy that cannot be easily classified. He uses Juan's (an incarcerated writer) experience of writing to articulate questions related to our literacy classrooms: What can literacy really do and not do? And, what should I teach? Berry argues that the prison writing classroom demonstrates one example of how "little we *understand* the lives of our students and the complex investments they place in writing and literacy—and how their beliefs are often notably different from our own" (138). Back to the writing classroom in the prison, Berry suggests that writing provided the opportunity for the incarcerated writers to carve out a space from which to construct narratives of possibilities (139). Within these narratives of possibility, the incarcerated writers could "recreate" and "re-represent" themselves (141; 143). Berry refers to such as "self making" and "world making" through literate practices (155). So often they did reconstruct their "selves" as they came to terms with what has and continues to haunt them. Writing allowed them to imagine a self becoming in a world inherently different.

An inheritance of being racialized and minoritized haunts prison inmates. This much is observed in Berry's work. For instance, Benny, an African American man from the inner city of Chicago, foresaw himself as a businessman. He was denied this projected identity by a teacher who stated to him, "You'll never be a businessman—a janitor maybe!" (Berry 2014, 145). While Benny, according to Berry, did not fully understand why his teacher had stated this, it is possible to surmise that the school-to-prison pipeline coupled with the prison-industrial complex haunted Benny. It is possible that Benny's teacher was both aware of Benny's inheritance and complicit in normalizing injustices. Berry, throughout his piece, captures various other kinds of hauntings, all of which can be captured by one passage: "Much of his [a student's] writing was linked to a future in which he dreamed that he could remake himself" (150). One has to wonder if Berry himself, who had a father who was in and out of prison, also used writing to imagine a future in which he was no longer haunted by a genealogy and literacy. His account of writing a story that depicts an effort by a desperate "self" [Berry] to "rescue my father" is perhaps most telling that he too was haunted by a genealogy and literacy that lurked in the beyond and yet was present in and around him (151).

The hesitation or concern I have with prison literacy work deals in matters of desire, interest, and power. I have no access to any teachers' or scholars' true motives. It is possible though to apply what William Benoit (1996) refers to as "discourse about actions." If motives are "accounts" or "linguistic devices that function to explain, justify, interpret, or rationalize actions" (70), how might the questions literacy educators ask reveal to us implicit desires and interests? The prompt given to Juan by Berry (2014, 137)—tell the class and me about your experiences—is suggestive of desires and interests to know and understand what one possibly cannot. My concern here is not with Berry, who transparently makes note of contradictions and limitations that take place when educators desire to understand the literacy narratives of others, *per se*. Rather, my concern is with those teachers and scholars who blur the lines between possibility and impossibility; those who desire to "write through the distortion that prevents us from seeing the lives and learning of those incarcerated and the injustices they face" (139). Like with Hinshaw, seeing and learning assumes that incarcerated writers can be heard in and on their own terms.

Berry, throughout his piece, expresses a concern with being able to understand. Yet, perhaps in a slip of the hand, he writes, "I saw the students, I saw my father, and I saw a great faith in the power of language" (151). This may seem inconsequential. But it is precisely this kind of exchange and consultation with incarcerated writers that equivocates seeing with hearing. This is a betrayal of the possible in translation. Perhaps for no other reason does Gayatri Spivak (1994b) pose the question, "Is the subaltern transparent?" (63). This question is expanded upon in her article, "Responsibility," in which we find a "subaltern" making a case in front of the World Bank, who assumingly is responsible to other human beings. Misplaced notions of seeing and hearing, as well as the reality that "no appropriate response" can be "proffered" to the subaltern, (62) Spivak notes:

In order to hear him, "Europe" would need him to represent responsibility, by reflex, in "Europe's" way. In other words, he would have to change his mind-set. That is how the old colonial subject was shaped. When we [educators] do it, we call it education. (61)

How does the above passage relate? As educators and scholars claim to see and hear the “other,” I wonder how much of this seeing is predicated upon seeing the “educator” within the narratives of the “other.” Some might argue it is too easy to say we cannot understand the subaltern. That misses the point. When Spivak writes, “All responsibility is a simulacrum of responsibility, perhaps. But all complicities within this necessity are not equivalent” (59), she is asking us to do two things: (1) to understand the limits of transparent understanding and (2) to not assume that “pure” responsibility can appear “unstructured and unstaged” (45). Thus, the argument here is not that we should quit literacy and rhetorical work within prisons, but rather we must “check” our desires. Spivak (1994a, 68) notes there is a desire to disclose and know the “other”—to imagine an authentic speaking-subject. “Desire and its object,” Spivak writes, “are a “unity” (69). This reality haunts the literacy educator.

Can the subaltern speak? The question is an indictment upon academics and others who profess to understand or to see and hear. I am quickly reminded of my letters from him. The pretext of the statement, “Hello son,” anticipates a level of comprehension that is mitigated by a desire to be heard: “Can you hear me son...can you understand what I am saying”? Cloaked in this aspiration, he proceeds with his exhortation: “don’t be like me.” When he writes, “I will rely on your mother to explain all this in terms you’ll understand,” I wonder how much is lost in translation, from his hands to the letter written, in her interpretation and translation of meaning to me, and in my own malaise of comprehension. What is graspable and not? Now, I wonder, who will the the academic scholar rely upon? If all text must be evaluated, interpreted, and reconstructed, should our trepidation not be the very real epistemic violence that emerges from the inflection of extracting knowledge or even the subject position of the “insider-outsider” informant who translates both the material and body as text? Are the “incarcerated” transparent? They exist as such for they are absent in both forms of the text despite the supposed readability of them. All we have are traces that develop what it engenders—displacements or X-marks (Lyons 2010): writings that mark the incarcerated space from which they neither speak or are seen in and on their own terms.

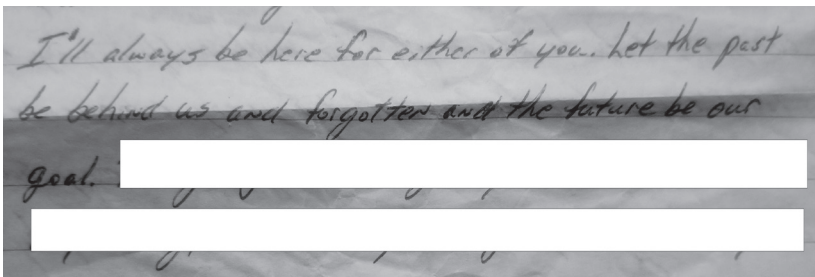
Can we understand the rhetoric of prison inmates? Invention complicates this. Berry's (2014) piece is telling when he writes: "There is a risk, of course...I did not necessarily understand Anthony any better because of my experience with my father" (151). There is a moment within Berry's article that stands out for me. William, one of the prison inmates, states, "Come on now...I made it up" (137), after Berry asks him how he saw an advertisement without any access to the Internet. The announcement that he "made it up" is significant because it illuminates invention practices; the narrativization of a re-invented self. Indeed, Berry recognizes this when he makes the connection between prison writing and a "renewed sense of self" (137). There is no denying that hope resides within such letters, a hope of being different—narratives of possibility (139). Attentive to Berry's call for a balance between "naïve beliefs" and "realistic possibilities" (140), though, I would like to contend with his statement that by "attending to the work of narrative" we can "move beyond the question of whether a story is true or false" (142). A focus on how the "apparent truth of a narrative is constructed" (142) would inevitably lead us to questions about material constraints that play out in terms of spatial and temporal boundaries. And this is important because there are deceptive stories. It is no coincidence that it is the children of the incarcerated who carry the burden of such stories.

Franklin (2008) is not incorrect in saying that "the penitentiary can help the academy learn how to read" (648). Indeed, what Spivak calls forth is a politics of careful reading and a language that must be learned. But within a field so overdetermined by a history of colonial encounters and interactions, this leaves us in a precarious position between heeding an "ungraspable call," of being answerable for and responsible to, and a "setting-to-work," which are not purely academic (Spivak 1994b). Precarious because prisons are manifestations of good intentions (forcing those inside to contemplate their sins) overshadowing the well-intended work of literacy educators. Because of collective amnesia of this lineage and because desire and its "objects" are a unity, they remain haunted. When Berry (2014, 141) talks about how writing produces narratives that can be read as both *artifact* and activity, I am hauntingly reminded of Western traditions of collecting and preserving artifacts from "othered traditions." Collection and preservation of artifacts train educators and scholars to view them in ways that designate a "dead object,"

whereby the place of the living is marked by those on the other side of the razor wire. Collecting and displaying artifacts creates a haunting predicament—stripping real bodies in real situations and presenting coherent selves and narratives with the image of the academic scholar as the replacement.

Above, I reviewed three articles to illustrate each scholar's own haunt(ed/ing) genealogies and literacies. What is at stake here and what continues to drive this conversation are matters of inheritances and responsibility relating to the academic scholar. As a framework, hauntings would both remind the academic scholar of the inextricable relationship between desire, interest, and power and prompt them to be attentive to how the “secrecy of the secret does not disappear with revelation” (Spivak 1994b, 23) regardless if it says “read me, will you ever be able to do so” (Derrida 18). Most importantly, as a conduit for a de-colonial option, hauntings would ask the academic scholar to learn how to address oneself to hauntings, which would help begin the process of epistemic disobedience and de-linking for them.

## HAUNTINGS AND A DE-COLONIAL OPTION



*Figure 5: Past and Future*

Often, he would express in letters to me that he didn't understand why my mom “decided to stop writing me.” Perhaps, it was because she knew the illusion exhibited in his utterances, “Let the past be behind us and forgotten and the future be our goal.” “My son,” which is how he often started his letters to me, though, gripped and haunted me. Projected onto my body, and internally felt, was my future. And sure, today I am that vision of hope expressed in the past now enunciated

in the present. I “made it out,” as my friends like to say, many of them whose hope ran with mine. But my sense of self was moored by prison narratives at the nexus of an interplay between a past and its calculable arrival in the future. I had to address myself to hauntings, but in the process, I learned how to speak a foreign language and learned to be a different kind of scholar. I choose to allow his letters to survive in the present then because they unveil thoughts and memories and words and literacies that wedged me between stories-so-far and the possibilities of new stories. The dominant trope of my genealogy and literacies is a haunting and thus I refuse to accept a future and a responsibility without it.

I have spoken at length about hauntings. As a framework, I believe it goes hand-in-hand with a de-colonial option. Both would benefit the academic scholar. The struggle of a de-colonial option is changing the terms (concepts) and contents (histories) of conversations (Mignolo 2007). This means denouncing and fracturing hegemonic structures of thought and feeling and shifting towards a re-thinking of the scholar of hauntings as the essential agent of transformative change. It is important to note that I am not suggesting then that prison work is not important or that it should not circulate beyond individuals or facilities. Without such work of learning and disseminating “inside” language, we would not know about the injustices of the “inside” as we do now. Rather, I am arguing we need to learn how to address ourselves to hauntings and be more accountable to how we represent the “incarcerated” and their literacies. A framework of hauntings would work to remind the literacy educator that their past cannot be forgotten (a colonial memory), while a de-colonial option would serve as powerful medium for active de-linking (Cushman et al. 2019) and epistemically disobeying disciplinary knowledge and management of said knowledge. Hauntings and a de-colonial option demand epistemic de-colonization, a learning to unlearn process from all.

The two “scholars” mentioned in this essay share *haunt(ed/ing)* genealogies and literacies—constellated hauntings. If hauntings belong to the “structure of every hegemony” (Derrida 1994, 46), and if we are truly invested in fracturing said hegemony, we must learn how to select, interpret, and orient ourselves to what haunts us.

The “foreign language” Derrida speaks of, that a de-colonial option demands—which, to be clear, is the language of hauntings—requires a different kind of orientation. Are we ready to be a different kind of scholar?

Perhaps...



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# Slave Pedigree

Eduardo (Echo)  
Martinez

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we're all pets chained like Pandora charms  
circling God's righteous wrist  
i remember she said this  
as she dangled around with her head down  
like a pay phone off the hook in an empty  
booth  
i made the mistake of picking it up one night  
and saying "hello" more than once  
the voice, her eyes  
dinner plates full of surprises  
boxes of chocolate mints, licorice dishes  
she insisted  
the only karma that genuinely exists . . .  
*is God's*  
and maybe . . .  
all this we're forced to endure, isn't really  
our fault  
how conceivable, to believe that our designer  
makes no mistakes  
we make them for him  
there was freedom in her words . . .  
*the hardest kind*  
like a prisoner

accepting the reality of a sentence without a period  
she said we're all linked . . . connected.  
and i remember this scene vividly in the movie *Misery*  
the writer chained to his own script  
survival trying to outwit death  
and his reward for trying to get back on his feet and breathe  
what followed after,  
the sledgehammer across the ankle  
maybe, that wasn't the intended metaphor  
then a tear scrolls to the edges of her chin  
where it trembled like a frightened drop from a leaky faucet  
we dropped deep  
and stayed there anchored  
answering questions that have no answers  
*you know?*  
*it's sad for fish, their ocean is their graveyard*  
*they're born to swim over their graves*  
seashell skeletons with stories  
how the reef grows like hair  
and nails after you're buried  
when we resurfaced profound seems shallow  
*you know?*  
*we spend our lives walking over our graves*  
*then in the end*  
*pour ourselves back into the beginning*  
are fingernails shovels that still carry our old dirt?  
she chirped,  
*the soil will evaporate before the chains oxidate*  
potential radiates from my skin  
tattoos and taboos  
*they killed another one on CNN*  
*and he won't be convicted*  
she said it with conviction  
*God's karma starting to come back*  
her words were seasoned in feelings  
the cottonmouth, not from the screaming  
but from keeping quiet for too long  
dealing with too many fortunes  
too many palms holding onto chains  
a tug-of-war of handshake links . . .connected

she asked me if i had learned to control my hopes yet?  
and i felt she sensed the shame in my truth  
*hey!*

they can't cage your imagination

they can't cage your imagination

they can't cage your imagination

like they cage the youth

like they cage animals

and i wanted to tell her  
that maybe in theory  
we're all animals  
not to say God didn't create us  
but we might just be his pets  
because being animals comes natural  
as natural as being chained to a tree  
on the wrong side of the fence  
but i don't speak  
and my thoughts scatter  
like roaches when the lights come on  
i understand her connection  
i misunderstand my link  
so i let her rattle the chain  
    knowing . . .  
        it won't break.

**Eduardo Martinez** was telling tall tales even when he was little. He wrote his first poem from a jail cell. He's been published in *Cuban Counterpoints*, *Scalawag*, *Don't Shake the Spoon: A Journal of Prison Writing*, *Be Kindr* (an anthology) and in *The Miami Herald*. He can be heard on PBS and NPR and seen on CBS. His most poetic moment, though, was telling his wife "I do."

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# Transforming University-Community Relations: The Radical Potential of Social Movement Rhetoric in Prison Literacy Work

Celena Todora

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*Applying the framework of coalitional rhetoric, this paper seeks to consider the rhetoric of prison literacy work and its implications for university-community relationships. Through an examination of four academic publications—three peer-reviewed articles and one published conference paper—that advocate or reflect the possibility of coalition-building between prison education programs and prison abolition. The selected texts represent how scholars of prison literacy and public rhetoric bridge abolition and prison education ideals by (1) mobilizing other scholars to join the prison abolition movement as well as (2) making a case for how prison education programs can contribute to the prison abolition movement. This essay explores how activist prison education scholars employ and adapt coalitional rhetoric within their scholarship, such as publishing incarcerated students' writing to challenge dominant narratives, encouraging students to critique the PIC through critical pedagogy, helping other prison educators recognize the ways in which we are complicit, and much more. Considering the role of coalitional rhetoric in our work suggests the continuation of such coalition-building in directing prison education work to create social change beyond the university.*

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*In seeking to understand the circulation of writing and literacy practices within the discursive and material environments of the prison, we might expose practices that are hidden, or that are not meant to be read as literacy practice... We might subject writers to punishment.*

—Cory Holding, *Pitt Prison Education Project*

Cory Holding's reflections provide a powerful example of the complicit-activist conflict prison literacy educators face: although we may approach our prison education work with visions of social transformation, our engagement with vulnerable incarcerated populations has the potential to induce harm, compromising the positive impacts of our work. The identities of activist-scholars who work in prison education are fraught with tensions, contradictions, and setbacks; as prison literacy scholar Tobi Jacobi (2011) notes, many prison writing teachers are "simultaneously complicit and activist," an unavoidable facet of attempting to fight oppression within an institution steeped with systemic injustice (47). I am interested in how these scholars work to productively acknowledge their complicity and push for social justice through their scholarship and pedagogy. While this complicit-activism contradiction in the complex work of bridging higher education and carceral communities can never be "resolved," how can we, as scholars and teachers, create social change despite the challenges and risks?

Although I explore these irresolvable tensions entrenched in university-community relations, my purpose is not to emphasize the setbacks but instead the affordances that these tensions bring, enabling the spread of diverse ideas between the different communities. While service-learning scholarship and pedagogy within rhetoric and composition studies has made highly valuable contributions to the field and beyond (Adler-Kassner et al. 1997; Schutz and Gere 1998; Taggart 2005) as well as in inspiring my own work, I situate this project within a "social change approach" (Edwards 2006, 41) to community engagement, which Edwards argues is "necessary to change the structures in institutions and society that perpetuates systems of oppression" (41). Rhetoric and composition scholars like Dave Coogan and others echo this emphasis on social-change-oriented methods of community engagement. Coogan (2009) found that "stumbling backward into social movements through service-

learning projects challenged [him] to see the rhetorical work of movements differently” (151). This pedagogical reconceptualization demonstrates the potential for social movement rhetoric to promote moving away from “service” to social change in community-engaged pedagogies. Thus, social movement-oriented university-community partnerships have the potential to provide transformational pedagogical experiences and enact social change beyond academia.

Although prison education is not a movement itself, viewing prison literacy work through a social movement lens can inform models of university-prison and university-community relationships in the midst of inequity and uncertainty. Through an examination of prison literacy scholarship, I consider the significance of the upsurge in social movement rhetoric within recent prison education literature. More specifically, I investigate the manifestation of what I refer to as “radical coalitional rhetoric”<sup>1</sup>—derived from coalitional research in rhetorical, feminist, and sociological studies. Such radical prison education research suggests the potential for social movement-university coalitions and enables us to rethink our work’s orientations to rhetorical and power structures within university-community relations—including and more specifically, university programs within prisons and jails.

Recent activist-oriented initiatives and scholarship in prison literacy suggest the coalitional possibility<sup>2</sup> between prison literacy and social movements. Driven by prison education scholars who orient their scholarship, teaching, and/or program administration within broader social movements, these research and pedagogical initiatives call for more radical university-community partnerships (Jacobi 2011; Scott 2013). Many activist prison education scholars, including Meghan McDowell and Alison Reed (2018), network their “teaching into ongoing social justice movements” (150), which they enact in prison classrooms through abolitionist pedagogies that encourage students to critique and defy the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). Moreover, Coogan (2009) advocates for “moving students into social movements” through community literacy work, arguing that “our

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1 Term inspired by Dr. Peter Campbell at the University of Pittsburgh.

2 Rhetorician Karma Chávez’s (2013) term “coalitional possibility” emphasizes coalition as a “shared commitment to social and political change” (7) rather than “an avowed relationship” between social movement groups (8).

responsibility as teachers, students, and scholars is to form those publics that can perceive a more inclusive imaginary” to increase the impact of their work (164). These scholars and others approach their work through the perspective of prison abolition, aiming to contribute to the movement through their teaching, scholarship, and program administration, suggesting the potential for coalition formation between prison education programs and scholarship and the prison abolition movement (Jacobi 2011; McDowell and Reed 2018).

## **BRIDGING THE RHETORIC OF PRISON EDUCATION AND ABOLITION**

Although both prison education and abolitionist rhetorics intersect in their desires to take action to create change within the prison, there is also what prison education scholar Robert Scott (2013) refers to as an “unfruitful schism” between the two rhetorics (401). I argue that while this “schism” may be more outwardly apparent, there are more similarities than differences between the two rhetorics. Prison education and the abolition movement differ in their conceptions of what constitutes positive social change. First, a common frame within prison education scholarship is the notion that prison education has the potential to influence positive social change (Davis and Roswell 2015). This sentiment that university education can have a positive impact within the prison is not always shared within the abolition community. The prison abolition movement opposes the PIC in its entirety, including interrelated entities (Critical Resistance 2019; Scott 2013; Jacobi 2011), which may arguably encompass prison education programs. Prison abolitionist Dylan Rodríguez (2006) asserts that institutional “vectoring of power” between the educator, correctional officer, and warden diminishes the “possibility for the humanistic goodwill” of prison educators (94), undermining the possibility of social change within prison education programs.

Many prison education scholars experience this complicity in working within the prison system as contradictory to their worldviews (to a certain extent) yet still strive to enact positive social change in the prison abolition movement and within their scholarship and teaching. Reflecting upon this inevitable negotiation between institutional compliance and social change within prison education, Jacobi (2011) asserts that in the fight for social justice, “some [institutional]

boundaries must remain; some rules are inflexible;” therefore, prison educators must “recogni[ze] and work with the status quo” of the prison system and “come to terms with the repressions and rules” this sacrifice entails (47). Such sacrifices, social movement scholar Fred Rose (2000) finds, occurs “when bridge builders act on their different ideas and challenge the rules and beliefs of their own organizations,” yet they are “inevitably pressured by their colleagues to conform” (181). While some institutional concessions undoubtedly conflict with abolitionist goals to some extent, abolitionist prison educators choose to work within the institution because they value making change through available means and circumstances, taking advantage of university privilege to combat mass incarceration.

Abolitionist prison educators argue that we must accept this inherent institutional complicity affecting the possibility for social change within prison education programs. Jacobi (2011) echoes Rodríguez’s (2006) concerns of institutional symbiosis by asserting the inherent complicity of prison educators: “When one enters a correctional facility as a teacher or programme facilitator an alliance with the institution is formed” (47). However, Jacobi (2011) argues that “engaging literacy activism through coalition-building” enables the possibility of prison educators to “to remain within the gaze of both abolitionists and the correctional facilities whose partnership we require to engage in effective literacy work” (50). While there are undoubtedly disagreements here between prison abolitionist and prison education’s conceptions of social change, the process of coalition-building has the potential to bridge these differences, as rhetorician Karma Chávez (2013) argues, from the social interactions enabled by the act of coalescing, “people cannot see seemingly disparate struggles as anything other than related” (27). This intersectional perspective orients individuals toward a coalitional emphasis on solidarity-building across difference. Engaging in coalition-building work enables prison educators to envision and facilitate efforts to combat mass incarceration. To theorize the possibility for bridging the rhetoric of prison education and prison abolition, I will draw upon a range of social movement coalition theory to consider how prison education scholarship has employed coalitional rhetoric to orient toward the abolition of prisons—envisioning a just world where prisons are “obsolete” (Davis 2004). To communicate such

abolitionist ideals, these scholars coalesce rhetorics of prison education and abolition, reflecting radical coalitional rhetoric.

## **FRAMING RADICAL COALITIONAL RHETORICS**

To investigate how abolitionist prison educators employ radical coalitional rhetoric within their scholarship, this paper examines four academic publications—three peer-reviewed articles and one published conference paper—that advocate or reflect this coalitional possibility (see Table 1). Within the four texts, I am interested in exploring appeals to radical coalitional possibilities arguing for engagement with anti-prison communities and movements outside of the university.

In each article, these scholars advocate for introducing abolitionist ideals within prison education scholarship, pedagogy, and/or programs. It is this bridging of differing arguments that demonstrates coalitional possibility between prison education and the abolition movement and, thus, functions as radical coalitional rhetoric. Because the purpose of this analysis is to examine scholars' utilization of radical coalitional rhetoric, I selected only articles in which the primary intent is to coalesce prison abolition and prison education rhetoric. These four articles are some of the most cited sources in which prison education scholars explicitly propose abolitionist ideals.<sup>3</sup> Providing further context about each article, Table 1 comprises publication details and summaries of their respective purposes:

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<sup>3</sup> Some scholars reference abolition in other publications, but it is not the primary focal point as in these four articles.

Table 1:

Abolitionist Scholar Frame Alignment – Primary Sources

Author(s)	Source Title	Publication	Article Purpose
Tobi Jacobi	“Speaking Out for Social Justice: The Problems and Possibilities of US Women’s Prison and Jail Writing Workshops”	2011 article published in Critical Survey 23(3)	To mobilize prison literacy scholars to contribute to the abolition movement through their work by combatting social stereotypes of incarcerated individuals
Stephen John Hartnett, Jennifer K. Wood, & Bryan J. McCann	“Turning Silence into Speech and Action: Prison Activism and the Pedagogy of Empowered Citizenship”	2011 article published in Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies 8(4)	To argue for the integration of critical pedagogy (CP) practices in communication instruction to empower student agency through communication projects challenging the PIC

Author(s)	Source Title	Publication	Article Purpose
Robert Scott	“Using Critical Pedagogy to Connect Prison Education and Prison Abolitionism”	2013 article published in Saint Louis University Public Law Review 33(2)	To demonstrate how CP provides language connections between prison abolition and prison education and how prison educators can employ this language to disrupt the PIC
Laura Rogers, Wendy Hinshaw, Cory Holding, and Tobi Jacobi	“Bending Bars: A Dialogue between Four Prison Teacher-Researchers”	2015 CCCC <sup>5</sup> conference paper published in 2017 in Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine 3(1)	To encourage prison literacy scholars to pursue their teaching and scholarship from an abolitionist perspective to combat the oppression inflicted by the PIC

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5 Conference on College Composition and Communication



Each of these texts represents how prison education scholars bridge abolition and pedagogical ideals by (1) mobilizing other scholars to join the prison abolition movement as well as (2) making a case for how prison education programs can contribute to the movement. Through varied arguments, each text engages in radical coalitional rhetoric to advocate for the role of prison educators in promoting an abolitionist perspective in their work.

Radical coalitional rhetoric approaches framing differences from a perspective of productivity, as Chávez (2013) suggests that differences may not always hinder a coalition. Through a metaphor of musical dissonance, she illustrates how coalitional dissonance may actually bolster rather than injure a coalition: “dissonance potentially causes problems for relationships within movements, but it also instigates, agitates, and informs; dissonance disturbs and creates energy around some issue so that it remains altered in our consciousness; dissonance produces the necessity for movement” (131). This suggests that dissonance in coalition work might be framed as an opportunity for solidarity-building between the groups through “coalitional subjectivity” (Rowe 2008; Chávez 2013). Chávez (2011) considers “coalitional subjectivity” as the process in which activists “move away from seeing one’s self in singular terms or from seeing politics in terms of single issues” and pursue “a complicated intersectional political approach that refuses to view politics and identity as anything other than always and already coalitional” (3). This coalitional commitment to intersectionality as opposed to individuality enables an understanding and acceptance of multiple—perhaps differing or contradictory—experiences or perspectives. Therefore, coalitional subjectivity is especially important in coalescing the differing rhetorics of prison education and the abolition movement.

Radical coalitional rhetoric is driven by activists sustaining the coalition—rhetors crafting arguments to enable coalition-building. Sociological literature considers the role of “bridge builders” who form and/or sustain coalitions by functioning as conduits between—in the case of this project—prison education and the abolition movement (McCammom and Moon 2015; Robnett 1996; Obach 2004). Although the bridge builder role is both material and rhetorical, I focus on the rhetorical agency of these activists—prison education scholars doing

abolition-oriented work—in enabling coalitional possibility. These actors are vital, Chávez (2013) points out, in “creating opportunities to communicate in order to build bridges across lines of difference” (130). Bridge builders must have “an intimate understanding” of the two perspectives, learning to be “bilingual, capable of translating between different classes and movements” (Rose 2000, 167). For example, abolitionist prison educators understand the needs and values of the abolition movement, the university, other instructors, and prison administration, and are thus in a unique position to “translate” between the differing rhetorics.

Through the utilization of radical coalitional rhetoric, prison literacy scholarship advocates for a coalitional possibility between the prison education and abolition movements, which suggests an alternate model for community partnerships that seeks to address university-community power imbalances. Ideally, a radical coalitional framework may orient community-engaged pedagogy away from service and toward action. Therefore, the potential for social movement coalitions between university and community groups enables community literacy scholars to conceptualize the potential to engage students in critical consciousness development *and* enact social change through community partnerships.

To explore recent prison literacy scholarship’s rhetorical framing processes to bridge diverse perspectives on social change, I utilize the sociological theory of frame alignment. The concept of frames, derived from sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), are the “schemata of interpretation” that people draw upon to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” their individual life experiences within a broader context, such as society or the world (21). Within social movement studies, frames pertaining to social action are considered “action-oriented,” meaning that individuals and groups utilize frames to “organize experience and guide action” (Benford and Snow 2000, 614)<sup>6</sup>. As social movement action is influenced by both individual and collective frames, framing is a significant component of prison abolitionist

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6 While the noun “frame” refers to an individual or group’s meaning construction that leads to social action, the verb “framing” concerns the process in which social movement actors develop, generate, and articulate frames (Benford and Snow, 2000).

scholars' coalition-building efforts. I investigate how these rhetorical framing processes introduce prison abolitionist frames to the field of prison education.

Within the four texts, I examine frame alignment processes that bridge “interests and interpretive frames” (Snow et al. 1986; 624) between prison abolition and prison education, particularly those that constitute the discord between prison literacy’s conception of social change and abolition’s stance on institutional complicity. To understand how these complementary yet divergent perspectives of social change impact frame alignment processes within the literature, I limited my analysis to frame alignment that responds to this contradiction. Thus, my intention was to select frames thematically in terms of this tension, as opposed to categorically locating each instance of frame alignment. Because of this method of frame selection, my analysis likely reveals more about the bridging of complicity/social change frames within the four texts than the extent to which frame alignment occurs.

I am interested in how abolitionist prison education scholars utilize frame alignment processes to minimize frame disputes between prison educators and abolitionists. Frame disputes, introduced by sociologist Robert Benford (1993), arise within coalition-building due to the inevitability that “not all movement participants will necessarily share the same frame or interpretation of reality” (678). As Chávez (2013) reminds us, a framing dispute—or dissonance—between groups or movements does not “necessarily refer to a contradiction or opposition” but, more importantly, “calls for attention and must be addressed or it can create divisions that may hinder or immobilize a coalition” (131). Thus, bridge builders are essential to this work in utilizing dissonance productively to enable prison educators and abolitionists to “connect issues and minimize divisions where divisions might otherwise be expected” (14). Emerging from Benford’s study are three categories of frame disputes—diagnosis, prognosis, and frame resonance (see Figure 1):

**APPENDIX: Frame Dispute Coding Categories**

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<b>Diagnosis:</b>	<b>Involves the identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality. Focus here is on what is reality.</b>
<b>Prognosis:</b>	<b>Suggests solutions to the problems, including how to achieve the solutions, i.e., the identification of general strategies (e.g., direct action, legislative, electoral), tactics (e.g., sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, petitions), and targets. Focus here is on how that reality should be changed and on what is to be done to change that reality.</b>
<b>Frame Resonance:</b>	<b>Concerns the factors that affect the mobilizing potency of frames including the extent to which the framings are congruent with the audiences' observations, experience, and cultural knowledge. Focus here is on how a movement's diagnoses and prognoses should be presented so as to strike a responsive chord and mobilize people to take action on behalf of the movement.</b>

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*Figure 1: Benford's (1993) categories of frame disputes. Reprinted from "Frame Disputes within the Nuclear Disarmament Movement," by R. Benford, 1993, Social Forces 71(3), 699.*

In applying these frame disputes within my analysis of prison education scholarship, I argue that the social change/complicity frames reflect two distinct differences between how university prison education programs and the prison abolition movement define and combat prison injustice. Throughout the four selected texts, bridge builder scholars address potential frame disputes concerning diagnoses and prognoses of prison injustice—in the realm of possibility within prison education work—through frame alignment methods. This coalescing of prison education and abolitionist frames regarding diagnosis and prognosis suggests possibilities for frame resonance to further mobilize prison educators to fight against prison injustice within their teaching and scholarship.

## **DIAGNOSIS: DEFINING THE REALITY OF PRISON INJUSTICE**

In terms of coalescing frame disputes of diagnosis, prison abolition emphasizes the systemic oppression as the problem, while prison education programs tend to focus on rehabilitating the individual. Within the published conference paper, prison literacy scholar Wendy Hinshaw contends that individual narratives of rehabilitation are the basis of much (particularly published) writing by prisoners. While

personal and testimonial writing can be empowering, especially for writers whose voices have not previously been heard, a focus on the personal can also be damaging to incarcerated students, who may feel:

compelled to reconstruct their understandings of themselves and the stories of their lives along narratives of crime, punishment and individual redemption. The focus on individual transformation in prison discourses and prison programming is intense, and they reshape the stories that prisoners tell themselves and tell others about themselves. (Rogers and Hinshaw 2017, 79)

Emphasis on individual stories can undermine efforts to reveal and address the systemic oppression within the criminal justice system that is the basis of the prison abolition movement. Hinshaw bridges dissonance between traditional prison education and abolition frames in order to combat the limitations of individual discourses of education and reform. Many prison abolitionists, including bridge builder Tobi Jacobi (2011), advocate for prison literacy programs to promote counternarratives “beyond the usual rhetoric of individual responsibility and rehabilitation” that diagnose the larger problem of systemic injustice (45). Therefore, bridge builders are prison educators who communicate the importance of diagnosing systemic injustice and straying away from perpetuating individual rehabilitation narratives through their teaching and research.

Aiming to reconcile these differences in framing, Scott’s (2013) work demonstrates that the prison abolitionist and prison education framing of diagnoses are not so different. He asserts that:

Abolitionists need not be divided from prison educators who have similar critiques of the prison system. Furthermore, they may find that they share an uncompromising commitment to the disenfranchised: whether they are viewed as incarcerated scholars or political prisoners, the common denominator is opposition to the social order that views people only in terms of their criminal convictions (i.e. as “offenders”). Both movements share critiques of the racialized criminal justice system, the bottom-line approach to policing, and an absence of critical consciousness of the political economy of incarceration. (408)

Through bridging language such as “common denominator” and “similar,” Scott’s argument underscores the commonalities between diagnostic framing within prison abolition and education, including their mutual critiques of the prison system and emphasis on developing critical consciousness. Thus, there are similarities in what both ideologies consider to be wrong within the PIC, and these commonalities have the potential for coalition-building. Chávez’s work highlights the possibility for reciprocity and compromise in radical community partnerships, arguing that radical coalition work “take[s] up the needs [activists] see present in their own communities that require challenging division and building relationships” (144). As many prison education scholars aim to coalesce their activism and work, more intentionally performing within a coalitional context will enable the integration of diverse perspectives regarding methods of combatting mass incarceration and, thus, increase the development of coalitional subjectivities among activists.

In accentuating dissonance between prison education and the prison abolition movement’s diagnoses of injustice alongside their shared desires for social change, abolitionist prison education research bridges abolitionist frames to connect to pedagogy and research within carceral settings. For instance, Cory Holding introduces the abolition frame of complicity by arguing that prison education programs are “predicated on pedagogy that takes place under the authority of U.S. carceral control” (Rogers et al. 2017, 85). This framing diagnoses institutional and research complicity as an inherent component of prison education work, consequently disrupting the liberatory possibilities of our pedagogies. Matching this sentiment, Jacobi maintains that “a progressive pedagogy aimed at the justice system cannot be divorced from the institutional realities of working inside jails and prisons” (Rogers et al. 2017, 85). These examples highlight dissonance between prison education and abolition’s understandings of social change productively rather than harmfully (Chávez 2013). By amplifying both the abolitionist frame of institutional complicity and the social justice desires of prison educators, bridge builders introduce the role of reflecting upon complicity in diagnosing prison injustice within pedagogical work. These instances of coalescing abolitionist and prison education rhetorics demonstrate the development of coalitional subjectivities through diagnostic

framing—expanding prison educators’ conceptions of what it means for a pedagogy to be progressive and social-justice-oriented.

In addition to pedagogy, bridge builders further utilize this frame to amplify the prison abolition diagnoses of prison injustice—researcher complicity. Holding emphasizes the inequitable nature of research, arguing that “the prison context begs the question of whether free (not incarcerated) researchers should be undertaking such projects in the first place” (Rogers et al. 2017, 83). She fears that research can harm students through increased surveillance, possibly “expos[ing] hidden practices” (83). Holding’s argument frames institutional complicity as an instigator for much of these ethical issues, as the “institutional realities of academic labor” may result in research that “contributes to the greater effective working of the prison itself” (83). This rhetorical strategy once again employs dissonance to promote prison educator reflexivity, an important step in coalition-building.

Illustrating the interplay between commonalities and dissonance can be another strategy of coalitional rhetoric that may inspire both instructor reflexivity as well as hope for the possibility of social change. Engaging in this interplay, Hartnett et al. (2011) exemplify prison education’s potential to empower as well as hinder student agency, arguing that their research:

foreground[s] the inescapable fact that [their] imprisoned students, correspondents, and political collaborators face difficult and sometimes harrowing situations wherein the very act of communicating with us may place them in danger. Still, despite the hardships they face, the incarcerated men and women chronicled here desperately need to communicate with us, not only as means of maintaining their own senses of humanity, or of advancing their educations, or of trying to save their lives, but also to help those of us on the outside to see more clearly the many ways our incarceration nation is warping the fabric of democracy. (337)

This passage reveals how Hartnett et al. frame prison education within social change, asserting that critical pedagogical practices can still empower students despite the harm of the PIC. Hartnett



et al.'s amplification of prognosis framings once again demonstrates the interplay between dissonance and commonalities as a strategy for promoting both awareness of complicity and an abolitionist vision of social change.

Each of these instances reveal that recent prison education scholarship has appealed to diagnoses of prison injustice through the employment of coalitional rhetoric, which extends abolition framing to encompass the social justice frames of their audience: prison educators. This reflects common ground between the two disparate frames of social change. Although the differing diagnostic framing of social change and complicity appears to be incompatible, frame alignment enables bridge builders to forge ties between the frames to expound upon how prison educators can consider their pedagogical practices from the perspective of the abolition movement. In aligning prison education and abolitionist frames of diagnosis, bridge builders make space for the two ideologies to coexist, to work together to imagine a world without prison through prison literacy work.

## **PROGNOSIS: PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH PRACTICES**

In addition to diagnosis, prison abolitionist scholars bridge frames regarding the prognosis—how we “fix” problems of prison injustice—through pedagogical and research practices. Abolitionists maintain that we must dismantle the PIC, which means that prison reform efforts are not enough (Critical Resistance 2019). However, prison education programs tend to see the method of addressing the problem—at least the method in their power—as enacting social change through pedagogy and research. Thus, abolitionist prison educators align these differing prognosis frames through frame alignment methods, often resulting in a compromise between the two perspectives. For example, Hartnett et al.'s (2011) framing illustrates a compromise between the two prognostic frames, as they acknowledge their own complicity but maintain a determination to enact social change through their work despite this obstacle. Although they express “concerns about the power of the prison-industrial complex to co-opt [their] pedagogical efforts, [they] nonetheless” attempt “to illuminate new pathways to empowerment and, ultimately, social change” (333). Through this framing of social



change as obstructed yet possible, these bridge builders demonstrate the possibility for compromise in radical coalitional rhetoric.

Bridge builders communicate this rationale for this compromise to institutional complicity by emphasizing the value of their prison literacy work to the abolition movement. For example, Jacobi's article (2011) extends the boundaries of abolitionist framing of complicity within the PIC to accommodate prison education. She contends that her prison programs "do embody much of the spirit embraced by [Critical Resistance's] core work (international coalition building, grassroots organising, and public education) through an emphasis on local community outreach, teaching, and publication" (46).

Bridge builders also view the multiplicity of prognoses as working in harmony rather than discord. Hartnett et al. (2011) and Scott (2013) frame critical pedagogy as a tool for extending prison abolition ideals to pedagogy through its emphasis on student empowerment, dialogue, and problematizing established norms—suggesting that all of these have the potential to disrupt the PIC. Although different liberatory methods are applied throughout prison education programs, Scott sees this as beneficial rather than conflicting, arguing that:

Critical pedagogy is not the only avenue for exploring how progressive education can inform education in opposition to the prison system itself. Critical race theory in education, freedom schooling, and the Highlander Folk School are all sources of educational philosophy that link teaching practice to struggles for freedom and justice... Rather than dilute our different approaches, we could think of ourselves as multiplying our tactics... We have to organize against the prison system without assuming we know which levers and dials we are trying to manipulate. (414)

This prognosis framing advocates for variety in approaches to abolitionist pedagogy through an emphasis on the commonalities in the various methods. This framing sees dissonance within these varying methods as beneficial, reflecting an orientation toward coalitional subjectivities, incorporating multiple perspectives on methods of dismantling the PIC. Providing a tool for prognosis—how we can work toward an abolitionist prison pedagogy—bridge

builders extend abolitionist frames to incorporate pedagogies and methods that are possible for prison educators to strive for.

As bridge builders have suggested abolitionist methods that prison educators can adopt, further representing abolitionist prognoses, they also make a case for tactics prison educators should *not* employ: disseminating dominant narratives of individual transformation and rehabilitation. Maintaining that writing can counteract social change if we are not careful which institutional narratives we are contributing to, bridge builders align the abolitionist frame of complicity and the prison education frame that argues that writing influences social change (Rogers et al. 2017; Jacobi 2011; Scott 2013). In emphasizing complicity within the prognosis of research, bridge builders illustrate that a key component to how we combat prison injustices through our research is examining our positionality and combatting normative ideologies. Many prison educators, including Jacobi (2011) and Hartnett et al. (2011), do so through publishing and circulating incarcerated student writing. Jacobi argues that circulation of student writing can empower student agency and challenge social perceptions of incarceration through the production of “counternarratives” (Jacobi 2011, 41). While some bridge builders advocate for circulation as a social justice tool, Holding asserts that this is a “tool of the weak” due to its high risk for promoting oppressive narratives (Rogers et al. 2017, 85). This disagreement among abolitionist prison educators reveals the importance of researchers’ reflexivity of their own complicity to prevent the perpetuation of dominant narratives. Despite her cautioning against circulation, Holding considers how this method can function as an abolitionist tool, but it must be purposefully anti-prison. Extending abolitionist frames such as these within prison education research promotes researcher reflexivity as well as conversations imagining abolitionist methods of social change.

Additionally, Holding amplifies prison educators’ interests in social justice research outcomes by assuring the possibility that research practices can adopt abolitionist ideals. Some of the ideals she advocates for include acknowledgement of researcher complicity, conducting research for the purpose of resistance and achieving common goals with incarcerated writer, and framing incarcerated

individuals as writers rather than subjects. These abolitionist methods of research illustrate an extension of the complicity frame to amplify prison education scholars' values—research and social justice. The combination of frame amplification and extension engages both dissonance and commonalities between prison education and abolition frames of prognosis. This exchange reveals both the possibility for coalition-building and the significance of reflexivity when conducting research in a carceral setting.

Another key component of extending abolitionist frames of prognosis to prison education research entails how researchers communicate their work and the people they work with. Scott (2013) asserts that “anti-prison activists need to partake in...dialogue to formulate activism that are reflective of the linguistic realities of prison without falling into the trap of reproducing prison ideology” (412). His emphasis on how prison educators' language can perpetuate prison ideology demonstrates a tangible way that research can combat this complicity: choosing careful language to frame the work. He suggests disrupting normative prison language such as “distinctions between different classes of people: ‘prisoner’ versus ‘staff’ and ‘offender’ versus ‘civilian’” (412). Scott's suggestions for actively challenging institutional and dominant narratives within prison education research highlights connections between complicity and communicating our research. Employing language that prison literacy scholars understand, prison abolitionist scholars align prison abolition frames of prognosis and provide actionable strategies for an abolitionist vision.

In each of these texts, bridge builders' engagement with diagnosis and prognosis exemplifies the importance of anticipating potential frame disputes in efforts to coalesce ideals of prison education and abolition. Although the two ideologies are not entirely aligned, bridge builders are essential in illuminating the benefits of dissonance to coalition formation, opening up conversations about how such divisions can influence coalitional subjectivities. Through this coalition-building rhetoric, therefore, activist prison educators evoke the final framing category of frame resonance, which aims “to strike a responsive chord and mobilize people to take action” (Benford 1993, 699). If prison educators are able to see the abolitionist potential in

their work, possibilities are expanded for prison education efforts to join the movement to end mass incarceration.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the face of institutional pressures and ideological sacrifices, recent prison education scholarship illustrates the possibility for coalition-building despite differing perspectives between social movements and academic communities. Through radial coalitional rhetoric—employing strategies such as framing commonalities and dissonance, highlighting coalitional subjectivities, etc.—prison literacy scholars act as bridge builders to establish ideological links between their scholarship and the prison abolition movement, rhetorically identifying common values and bridging gaps between conflicting ideologies through frame-bridging processes. This coalitional orientation signifies a departure from paternalistic notions of service or even critical consciousness to those of social change, increasing the possibility for reciprocal community partnerships.

While there are differences in prison education and abolitionist perspectives on social change, coalitional subjectivities enable us to see parallels and benefits of compromise to achieve common goals. Ideological disputes are inevitable in coalescing, particularly when introducing radical ideas within institutionalized settings like universities and prisons. Though many prison abolitionists question whether or not their academic activism is truly affecting the larger movement, bridge builders bridge these frames through demonstrating the activist nature of their work.

Conceptualizing these activist-scholars as social movement bridge builders highlights the social justice work of these individuals within both the prison abolition movement and their prison education ventures. As Keith Edwards (2006) insists, “the Ally for Social Justice status is an aspirational identity one must continuously work towards” (53). In aspiring for this identity, bridge-building activist-scholars experience and perform social change while at the same time acknowledging their complicity of working within the oppressive Prison Industrial Complex.

As these representative texts suggest, scholars enact coalition-building through efforts such as publishing incarcerated students' writing to challenge dominant narratives, encouraging students to critique the PIC through critical pedagogy, helping other prison educators recognize the ways in which we are complicit, and much more. Considering the role of coalitional rhetoric in our work both advocates for the development of new approaches and suggests the continuation of such coalition-building in directing prison education work to create social change beyond the university.

This upsurge in radical coalitional rhetoric within prison literacy scholarship can serve as a model for community-engaged writing work as a whole: listening to the needs of the community to curb systemic injustices rather than applying the band-aid of service work.

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# **Book Reviews**



## Review:

### *Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World*

By Baz Dreisinger

Lauren Alessi  
& Fairleigh Gilmour,  
PhD

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With the advent of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and Ava DuVernay's documentary *13<sup>th</sup>*, our collective awareness about mass incarceration in the United States, and around the world, has taken on new significance. Fueled by these foundational contributions to our civic discourse, we are in the midst of a public reckoning about the dangerous ties between the prison industry and other systems of power like colonialism, racism, sexism, and classism. Criminal justice reform is now a bipartisan issue and a platform against which politicians are judged harshly. However, in spite of the progress we've made toward understanding the impacts of crime and incarceration, there is still concern about who the system is serving and how well. Are the proposed reforms meeting the needs of the communities most impacted by the carceral state? Or are they simply a continuation of the punitive, non-rehabilitative practices we've seen largely proliferated to date?

Prison education has been introduced and widely lauded as a viable, effective tool for rehabilitation and reintegration. Despite the devastating effects resulting from the discontinuation of Pell Grants for prisoners in the United States, there is still worldwide recognition of the importance of prison education. For example, in 2017, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime published a report advocating for the development of more prison-based education programs, echoing similar efforts by the UN Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice's Doha Declaration of 2015. It is within this international context of mass incarceration and the growing prison education movement that Baz Dreisinger's (2016) *Incarceration Nations* takes root.

*Incarceration Nations* takes us around the world to explore prison practices, reform, rehabilitation, and prison arts. Aimed primarily at a U.S. audience, this book asks complex questions about international practices of imprisonment: What does justice look like in other countries? What can we learn from others? Are there better alternatives to be found elsewhere? Dreisinger, currently the education director of the Prison-to-College-Pipeline program at John Jay College in New York, travelled to nine countries—Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Jamaica, Brazil, Thailand, Singapore, Australia, and Norway—in order to “see the world by seeing its prisons” (18). What she found was a multitude of brave, innovative efforts providing education and rehabilitation, juggling the goals of personal improvement, community building, healing from historical and generational trauma, and hope for a better world.

More memoir than academic research, *Incarceration Nations* provides a necessarily superficial analysis of the various criminal justice systems that Dreisinger encounters in her travels. She often spent only a few days in each country, and her engagement with local prisons varied due to tightly controlled access and public relations schemes. However, the real contribution of this book is not its account of the empirical data, which unequivocally shows mass incarceration to be profoundly damaging to people and communities. Rather, it is the way in which Dreisinger imbues these statistics with emotional resonance. Dreisinger manages to humanize her prisoners and their grief, but also evoke the ambivalence and frustration she experiences

as a teacher and activist and the grace and compassion of forgiveness (particularly in the section on Rwanda) and hope in redemption. This emotional engagement is also in itself political. As Dreisinger notes, if the public began to decry prisons, so would politicians: how we engage with prison and prisoners is, therefore, far from superficial.

Dreisinger traces the historical roots of colonialism and penal colonies across the world. Sewing together pieces of a globalized system, we see how prison—both the place and the practices that encapsulate it—was indeed commodified, traded, and spread throughout history. We see how prison aesthetics bear a resemblance to certain colonial regimes in history: “gaols” set up in port cities modeled by Europeans in the sixteenth century, tools for bodily restraint used during the slave trade, and military prisons from imperial forces in the 1880s (51). We also see, perhaps too often, comparisons to Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania and Auburn Prison in New York—their architecture and models of confinement being replicated and held as the gold standard in several countries she visits. As Dreisinger notes, the United States’ criminal justice system and policies have been influential in not only shaping international values toward crime and punishment, but also in encouraging other countries to meet our standards of punishment and (in)tolerance: “In the United States, we have created a monster with tentacles entrenched in communities across the globe” (304). This influence is particularly stark in her depictions of extended solitary confinement in a supermax prison in Brazil and of the complicated role private prisons play in the Australian context. Here we see some of the most disturbing practices of the U.S. system being reproduced in other countries.

*Incarceration Nations* also explores prisons in countries that have adopted different attitudes towards incarceration. In Rwanda, in the most powerful investigation into the transformative practices happening inside prisons in the book, Dreisinger observes a restorative justice program for survivors of genocide and prisoners with historical ties to the militia, *génocidaires*. Her visit to Norway, meanwhile, highlights an alternative paradigm to the U.S. approach: In Norway, the denial of liberty itself is seen as the punishment. Prisons allow continued family relationships and emphasize reintegration into the community. Dreisinger doesn’t pretend either country’s prison

system is flawless, but both of these chapters emphasize the potential benefits of alternative approaches. These two chapters explore some countries' dedication to unite communities during times of harm rather than respond with a deterrence model of punishment based in fear, vengeance, and hate. Rwanda and Norway embrace the potential for communities to coalesce in times of tragedy—of which crime is a piece—to use pain and suffering to facilitate solidarity. Channeling Angela Davis, Dreisinger debates the potential of crime to be used: “Not as a change to engender separation from others but a profound reminder of how deeply interconnected we are, such that one person’s actions have the capacity to impact so many” (297).

Art—in the form of literature, theatre, and music—is shown to be cathartic and humanizing in the prison setting. Particularly poignant are the stories of excitement, hope, and vulnerability from the prisoners Dreisinger meets while facilitating programs or touring the prisons. Several prisoners she worked with continued to write her following her visits, expressing their commitment to writing, reading, music as well as growth and rehabilitation more generally. In Thailand, Dreisinger was able to co-lead a drama group for incarcerated women, which gave them the opportunity to envisage and act out alternate lives and to break from the identities they had been prescribed by society. In Uganda, Dreisinger was able to lead a one-week creative writing class with the goal that the students on the inside would be able to continue the program after her tenure. Sustainable programs are a key goal, and in several destinations, she sought to instill the hope of a prison-to-college pipeline program being left in her wake. In practice though, this usually amounted to delivering an elevator pitch to prison or governmental staff. Dreisinger shows readers the potentially positive impacts of art and education in prisons while being keenly aware of the ephemerality of many of her own efforts.

*Incarceration Nations* is at its best when problematizing prison arts, rehabilitation, and the culture of activists/volunteers. Alongside describing the hunger for education and arts programming communicated by the prisoners, Dreisinger also grapples with the realities of her visit: what good was she really doing traveling to prisons around the world? And for that matter: does writing or drama



or restorative justice meaningfully move the needle on overturning the systems of punishment and capitalism that led to the current crises of mass incarceration around the globe? Do these efforts constitute just “a Band-Aid on an amputated limb” (135)? Dreisinger extends this critique of rehabilitation programs to engage with the complicated role of raced and classed privilege in activist work. She observes the “unfortunate, too-familiar white-savior-of-black-souls dynamic” at play in prison reform and activist efforts (69). Yet she also acknowledges that her role as a professor at John Jay was sometimes actively deployed, and also deliberately manipulated by others, in order to gain access, publicity, and public support in such a way as to benefit prisoners. While these questions will weigh heavily on readers, particularly those involved in prison education or advocacy efforts, we are encouraged by the interplay of Dreisinger’s work and a recent RAND study (2013) finding that correctional education programs may be most effective at preventing recidivism when people on the inside are connected with community facilitators from the outside. With this in mind, we can keep Dreisinger’s concerns at the forefront of our work while also pushing forward to ensure continued access to education programs, outside support, and community engagement for people locked away in prisons around the world.

A single poem, restorative justice session, or prison theater troupe performance may not reverse the rising tides of the prison industrial complex, but they do lay seeds that will continue to sprout hope, solidarity, and a blossoming resistance to the spread of penal ideologies across the globe. *Incarceration Nations* captures the way that rehabilitative efforts can have profound impacts for incarcerated people. Yet while presenting the reader with powerful evocations of the transformative potential of these programs, Dreisinger leaves the reader in no doubt, by the end of the book, that mass incarceration, even with all the writing programs in the world, will remain a moral abomination. There are no easy answers here—and Dreisinger offers none—but there is hope, and a call to continued activism: For Dreisinger, “justice *is* movement” (300).

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## Review:

### *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison* by Patrick W. Berry

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When legislation<sup>1</sup> passed in 1994 denying Pell Grants for incarcerated students, prison college programs—once considered a valuable instrument for transformation—became nearly extinct. Access to higher education is increasingly aligned with privilege, and the messy intersection of incarceration and higher education aptly reflects the use of oppression, inequality, and surveillance as a means to profit—also known as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). Decades later, American taxpayers are realizing how costly this failed institution, the PIC, has proven to be. A 2013 study by the RAND Corporation linking prison education to reduced recidivism and employability provided an evidence-based argument on the economic savings of prison education (Davis 2013). Scholars and policymakers frequently cite the RAND Corporation study in their

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1 H.R.3355, Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994

claims for providing access to higher education to individuals directly impacted by the criminal justice system. As a result, the case for college in prison has largely become an argument of economics. This evaluative approach highlights important outcomes of prison higher education, but it also risks dehumanizing those who take part in such programs. A transdisciplinary conversation is taking place around access to higher education for individuals impacted by incarceration. Both incarcerated and non-incarcerated scholars, and others who recognize the critical value of education for its own sake and not only as a means to an end product, are speaking up.

In his book *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*, Patrick W. Berry (2018) enters the conversation on literacy and higher education in prison with a much-needed perspective on the value of being in the moment and of the importance of considering the context of incarceration. Historically, literacy has been a tool for marginalizing, and Berry is skeptical of narratives that situate literacy as a magic bullet in the face of broader social and cultural problems. If our reasons for literacy in prison are *only* to serve future goals, such as job readiness, then less-measurable benefits of literacy practices based on the present are often overlooked. Berry locates literacy in the context of incarceration, and he asks us to consider “how we might develop pedagogies that are untethered to naïve beliefs in literacy’s power, yet mindful of realistic possibilities as well as the work that can take place in the present moment” (6-7). What Berry refers to as the “contextual now” includes narratives beyond those on the page—the “spaces wherein students use writing to share their stories” (38). He augments outcome-based literacy by esteeming the “acts of composing and of becoming that lead to deeper engagement with the world and one’s place in it” (14). Juxtaposing personal literacy narratives, rhetorical frames of literacy in prison, and the perceived purposes of prison higher education, Berry questions how incarcerated students make sense of both literacy and of life while taking courses in a college program. As a researcher, Berry considers his own literacy narrative and how it shaped this project. Having had a father who spent time in and out of incarceration, Berry perceives a narrow gap between the world inside and outside of prison.

Berry is careful not to negate the important connections between higher education and reduced recidivism and employability. And yet, prison higher education, if linked only to reduced recidivism and job prospects, not only commodifies education but also further marginalizes those with lengthy or life-term sentences. Berry insists on an expanded attentiveness to “the rich ways in which literacy and higher education can contribute to rehabilitation” (101). One might question the use of “rehabilitation,” only because it suggests a *return* to a functional state. Education may change the person in prison, but can it change societal mistrust of those with criminal histories? The need for equitable access to higher education responds to a problem more fundamental than one’s individual path to prison. As our world becomes increasingly fragmented, access to higher education has become symbolic of an unsettling question, which concerns how we care for one another. Berry is right to be critical of statistically based assessments that both dehumanize and further marginalize students in a system of power—particularly incarcerated students who are not close to the door. Equal access to higher education can raise prospects for more than a select few.

Berry introduces readers to an in-situ prison college program called “Project Justice.” Through ethnography and narrative inquiry, he investigates how students as well as instructors in the program situate literacy practices to weave together these partitioned worlds—in personal narratives, business proposals, pedagogical stances, and life after prison. Berry compares his own literacy narrative to those of his students to illustrate how beliefs about the power of literacy are shaped by gender, race, and class. Literacy narratives offer incarcerated students a tool to re-enter a world that they have been historically erased from, argues Berry, and teachers’ narratives inform pedagogies to support students in constructing these “narratives of possibility,” linking literacy with social change (21). By highlighting teachers’ narratives, Berry hopes to better understand “the motivations that inform their practices and perspectives” (69). The teachers in Project Justice represent a broad range of disciplines, yet each cares about social justice and about their teaching, and “their observations about what was happening in prison and what was not happening on their home campuses warrant close attention,” advises Berry (87). Whether in search of alternative teaching experiences, authentic pedagogy, or ways to connect teaching to social justice, those who teach inside

undoubtedly add a new dimension to this discussion, as their own experiences may be transformational.

Challenged to teach professional writing in a prison context, Berry situated incarcerated students as ethnographers of the conditions and limitations of being incarcerated. This authorial ethos allowed the students to develop proposals advocating for programs supporting life *inside* prison. By presenting their proposals in a symposium called “Writing for a Change” (59) to prison administrators and Project Justice representatives, students engaged the role of audience and narrowed the divide between the world they knew and the world they were writing toward. An authentic audience “added weight to the assignment, leading at first to anxiety but then, ultimately, to appreciation” (64).

Berry urges outside educators, whose beliefs about literacy and education may be shaped by their own histories and privilege, to practice Krista Ratcliffe’s *rhetorical listening* to better understand students in the context of incarceration and to understand literacy “as a rhetorical act shaped by our specific understandings of ourselves and the world around us” (106). *Doing Time, Writing Lives* offers a nuanced reading of the ways incarcerated students locate literacy to mobilize beyond static identities of crimes of record. Moving toward “figured worlds” or third spaces that allow for more fluid identities, students can begin the process of transformation in their own narratives. The final chapter discusses the role of literacy in post-incarceration and problematizes “the dangers of a commodified curriculum in which education and literacy are reduced to mere instruments of economic progress” (90). Berry draws from a case study of a formerly incarcerated Project Justice student who, despite his education, faced employment discrimination. He illustrates both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the program and the limitations of measuring prison higher education by situating students as only economic data linked to recidivism. In its mission to understand how incarcerated students situate literacy and higher education, Berry’s project challenges notions of literacy as the paramount solution for success, particularly as related to prison higher education. He has compassionately established the work of his students with the work required of a society if success of the larger community is to occur.

Perhaps the single most critical goal of Project Justice cited by Berry, “to help students come to see themselves differently” (101), is one that we can all embrace in order to effect change.

Prison education resides at a difficult intersection of what needs fixing in the broader apparatus beyond prison walls—the societal ills that create a climate that accepts mass incarceration and cultivates beliefs that warehousing human beings is somehow a solution to a problem—and the commodification of higher education. Berry’s *contextual now* offers a rhetorical frame for literacy as a means of understanding how we compose lives and meaning in a world that must be answered. Before change can occur, a belief that change is possible must be present. If we are to change why we have been complicit for so long while the PIC has been constructed, and why many now are behind the effort to dismantle this failed model through education, then perspectives such as Berry’s offer urgently needed insight, reminding us of *why* we advocate for an educated citizenry in the first place. Literacy skills and higher education cannot take away a criminal record and the discrimination it accompanies. What Project Justice offered was an alternative space for participants to become involved in “the complex work of reimagining oneself in the moment through education, writing, and the pursuit of realistic possibilities” (100). These narratives reflect the power of human transformation and the need that each of us has to transform, in the context of what prison is about.

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## Review:

### *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*

Eds. Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson

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**D**emands for more innovative approaches to prison education have flooded the calls for papers in rhetoric and composition journals (Hinshaw & Jacobi 2018; Smith McKoy and Alexander 2018), marking a necessary push toward more dialogic prison engagement and collaboration. Specific to this special issue, Hinshaw and Jacobi (2018) hope to curate pedagogical awareness to include mass incarceration into the rhetoric and composition vocabulary, taking a critical approach to the process of establishing prison education programs and cultivating rehabilitative promise. Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson's (2018) edited collection, *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, is highly kairotic due to the current breadth of prison education programs that struggle to meet the educational needs of prisoners, speaking directly to the nearly two thirds of released prisoners who are rearrested for a new crime within three years of release ("Recidivism"

2014). This edited collection approaches the performance of prison teaching and learning through multiple perspectives and intelligences. The opening quote by Albert Camus sets the tone: “In the depths of a prison, dreams have no limits, never held back by reality” (Lockard and Rankins-Robertson 2018, ii). Prisoners struggle to attain effective means of rehabilitation due to varying curriculum designs, distracting and demanding prison lifestyles, and the stigmatizing effect of being labeled “prisoner.” To address this injustice, Camus’s quote is effectively a call for action for prisoner educators to keep an eye toward accommodation, empathy, and exploration.

The twelve chapters in this edited collection are divided into three thematic parts. Part One reimagines the limits of the prison classroom as a dialogic interaction that attempts to break stereotypes, actualize communicative potential, and accurately represent prisoner voices. While most of the chapters advocate for pedagogy catered to prisoner voices, the selected chapters highlighted in this book review demonstrate specific models for combatting the marginalization of prisoner voices. For example, Bidhan Chandra Roy revamps Foucault’s platform for prisoners to bring their voices into public discourse by working directly with prisoners, problematizing the rhetorical function of how meaning is conveyed and addressing the socioeconomic privileging of those who already know how to write well. Roy explains how his “project sought to empower prisoners to speak for themselves rather than have public intellectuals, such as Foucault, speak on their behalf” (34). Prisoner voices that are cultivated through dialogue rather than representation avoid potential scrubbing of prisoner voices. Foucault’s platform to bring prisoner voices into public discourse, on the other hand, dealt only with prisoners who could already write, effectively silencing the voices that struggled with writing. Roy capitalizes on dialogic pedagogy to help students cultivate their own writing voice. By creating a space for dialogue, students are more able to engage with the instructor, the classroom culture, and the process of articulating their thoughts. Engagement contributes to meaningful creation and self-awareness, skills necessary for self-improvement.

To sum it up, Juan Pablo Parchuc writes, “Prison writing teaches that the margin is never a limit but a border and very often a platform

from which new frames give shape to other worlds and horizons,” echoing the tone Camus’s quote sets at the beginning of the book (67). Contrary to the inflexible structures of prisoner life, prison writing can be incredibly flexible with how meaning is created, exchanged, and articulated. Both Roy and Parchuc champion the margin as merely a starting point to expand and reshape our perception of the transformative nature of writing through dialogue.

Part Two continues the discussion of educational limitations by showcasing specific issues in prison classrooms, accenting meaningful social change and strengths-based transformation. For instance, Tasha Golden uses trauma-informed pedagogy for young incarcerated women in response to detention facilities “still designed and operated with males in mind” (128). By explicitly addressing the specific needs of her students, Golden affords her students a space that’s conducive to their creative personalities. Golden argues that “opportunities for directed writing in a detention facility should result in improvements in participants’ mental and physical health,” always prepared for needed adaptation and autonomy building (132). Meaningful social change in prison education programs depends on unearthing the potential of our students, fundamentally upending our current perceptions of how students should learn by encouraging students to embrace their own ways of learning. Golden’s trauma-informed pedagogy may be limited to her female prisoner demographic but can be adapted and molded to fit the needs of other students.

The chapters in Part Three demonstrate various projects in organized prison education programs, which are effective models for burgeoning prison educators. By detailing the success of the following programs, this edited collection highlights the social justice initiatives of the past as well as pushes for more variations in the future. To illustrate my point, Julie Rada and Rivka Rocchio develop prison theater workshops that cultivate a “dynamic interplay of intimacy and distance and perhaps serves as an antidote to the invisibility and isolation that constitute the prison experience” (172). Performance provides agency to the artist to control the message and interaction with the audience, a practice denied by the structure of the prison system. Rada and Rocchio’s prison theater workshops further develop Roy’s dialogic pedagogy by employing a medium that

may better accommodate prisoner voice expression. This exploration of different mediums speaks to the core philosophy behind dialogic pedagogy: meaning making is rarely achieved from one-sided instruction; rather, effective meaning making comes from a mutually beneficial relationship based on trust, empathy, and consideration.

Following the discussion of effective meaning making is Meghan G. McDowell and Alison Reed's chapter on the critical establishment of effective prison education programs. A significant deterrent to utilizing dialogic pedagogy that prioritizes prisoner voices is the rhetoric behind the construction of these education programs. McDowell and Reed argue, "the rhetoric of dehumanization in jails and prisons to be part of the same mechanism that facilitates the humanization of jails and prisons through the civilizing mission of the neoliberal university's production of 'good' (i.e., capitalist-conforming) subjects" (156). Serving as more of a commentary on the social issues between university and prison partners, McDowell and Reed's chapter demands that university prison education programs be more critical of how they structure the meaning-making process with imprisoned writers. While the writing produced in prison classrooms is meant to represent prisoner voices, unfair privileging of university voices may sanitize or truncate prisoner voices. Perhaps a chapter better placed at the beginning of this edited collection, McDowell and Reed argue that savior formations of prisoner education programs do not yield dialogic prisoner education programs, a key concept that should foreground the stated projects.

Similar to McDowell and Reed's chapter critiquing the neoliberal university's production of prison education, Kimberley Benedict takes a meta-analysis, arguing that writing-about-writing pedagogies help make students better writers by communicating: "You are welcome to have access to the same information that writing authorities and experts have, information that is constructed less like a rulebook and more like a dialogue in which contributors build on, critique, and revise each other's ideas" (226). Both McDowell and Reed's and Benedict's chapters take appropriate measures to engage in dialogic pedagogy from the start by communicating that dialogue in the prison classroom starts with dialogue in planning for the prison classroom.

*Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers* aptly describes how prison education could reflect a prosperous exploratory space in which teachers and students learn and create together. I suspect future research on teaching incarcerated writers would include chapters on how students develop into peers and instructors through their education, further enabling the community engagement and interconnectedness that prison culture controls. In addition, future research could explicitly instruct how to develop prison education programs in universities that currently have none, catered specifically for inexperienced prison educators.

Regardless of your experience with imprisoned writers, approach this book the way you would any classroom at the beginning of the school year: realize that your students last year will not be the same this year; acknowledge that the nuances of your students' learning personalities will help guide the curriculum; and recognize that students learn best when they feel connected to the content, the instructor, and their peers. Opportunities arise with an open mind, "never held back by reality."

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## Review:

### *Feeding the Roots of Self-Expression and Freedom*

By Jimmy Santiago Baca, with Kym Sheehan and Denise VanBriggle

**Debra Des Vignes,**  
*Founder, Indiana Prison  
Writers Workshop*

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**A**s the founder of Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, I go into Indiana correctional facilities each week to facilitate a creative writing workshop. The workshop, I would argue, allows my students to experience a therapeutic avenue for expression. **Writing** can encourage us to explore our emotional states and can cultivate more critical self-awareness and critical thinking. Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Feeding the Roots of Self-Expression and Freedom* is an inspiring curriculum-based collection of lesson plans designed to build confidence. It mirrors my own work with incarcerated students because Baca was once incarcerated and draws upon his own experiences and insights to educate and empower those who are confined. He uses his experience as a foundation for self-awareness and reflection. The approach of using poems from Baca's incarceration as a young man, along with curricular activities that include prompts on new ways of looking at things, are helpful to me as a creative writing instructor.

Specifically, his probing questions, such as “What does the word “home” mean to you?” help students remember fond memories, write from their heart, and provide opportunities for healing. Through leading the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, I’ve witnessed that creative writing is important to self-growth. It is also a positive outlet to allow one’s imagination to roam free.

*Feeding the Roots* consists of poetry and lesson plans. The book is broken up into four phases, as opposed to chapters, which include: “Dehumanization Process,” “Journeying Inward,” “Illuminating Outward,” and “Rehumanization Process.” Each phase is unique and allows the reader to view life differently. For example, in the “Illuminating Outward” section, there is a poem about what Baca sees in prison. He writes, “In prison the steel doors of my soul crack, crank open, and sunshine floods through down in pin thin light into the darkness of my heart, in over-pouring beauty, across the cement floor of my believes, across the steel screens guarding my dreams.” This passage not only gives the reader a glimpse of what lies beyond the walls of a prison but offers hope for the future. Beyond the sheer and raw beauty of Baca’s poetry, *Feeding the Roots* deftly presents the journey of a writer’s development through a framework that includes these four phases.

Further, the section on “Journeying Inward” is parallel to the ideology of a “hero’s journey,” wherein a hero goes on an adventure and in a decisive crisis, wins a victory and then comes home changed or transformed. This section of the book resonated with me in that it encourages the reader to explore his or her trials and tribulations as I frequently do through assignments provided to incarcerated students in my creative writing workshops. I enjoyed many of Baca’s prompts including “Write your own poem about confusion” and “How does hatred develop?”

My incarcerated students explore, take ownership of, and ultimately destroy the notions of a previous self, or how one was before becoming incarcerated, which are just the elements that Baca delves into. In life, it is important to analyze the “self” to better understand what feeds into the actions that oftentimes lead to imprisonment. Doing



so, I believe, can help those who are incarcerated gain stronger inner-awareness and confidence in their ability to self-express.

Baca's exercises encourage movements of growth and shifts in thinking and reinforce the underlying theme and core of the book, which is centered on rebuilding of a "self." The book uses descriptions, exercises, and sample poetry to assist instructors, like me, and students in the writing process. One of my favorite lines in the book is: "But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest; I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. This resonated with my students as they often describe feeling "free" through storytelling. The book is important to me because it emphasizes what's possible: a new life, hope, and healing. The prompts are designed to build confidence while gaining an appreciation of ideas and sensibilities about the world through literary expression. The unique voices of my students want to be heard, even stories of a trouble past, broken home, or lost childhood. We're all trying to make sense of something.

The book has provided me a wealth of resources—from the richness of the recommended reading lists to the wealth of new ideas for classroom prompts, including a look at what imagery would represent your life and cross-curricular exercises exploring the idea that social justice permeates much of today's young adult literate, contemporary fiction, and nonfiction as well as in graphic novels, varied medias, artwork, lyrics, poetry, and the news. Baca challenges readers to seek out connections that speak to you with an exercise to read a poem aloud titled "Life." Such an exercise would have otherwise taken me years to access or compile on my own. I'm so pleased to apply this new knowledge to my weekly classes at the Indiana Prison Writers Workshop, and any educator who is working to help a student find his or her voice through literary expression will benefit greatly from a close review of the resources Baca and his co-authors share.

When reading the book, I could follow along on his personal journey of exploration just as my students in the creative writing workshop did. Students are focused on changing their lives and have found resiliency along the way. Baca and his co-authors delve deep into

aspects rarely addressed in the writing classroom to help students move through a greater sense of discovery through self-expression and into the world of freedom and creativity, similar to the way my students do as they heal through writing. One of my students reflected on the writing class: “We didn’t come to class to be part of a cycle. We came to learn, embrace our plights, and release our pain in a way that allowed us to be free, which was vital to incarcerated men.”

Baca and his co-authors present a strong case for how and why the process of writing can remake the soul and help reset one’s life trajectory, by developing a series of questions designed to take readers on a personal journey. It was wonderful to receive the affirmation that many of my choices and approaches in my work with incarcerated students can and will yield shared results, including an increase in self-esteem and a newfound freedom through writing. This affirmation will prove useful, if not outright inspirational, to others, from the academically trained to the impassioned volunteers who are committed to working with the incarcerated and may be seeking something beyond a set of best practices for the craft of writing and more akin to system for the successful engagement and stewardship of another’s personal growth and development. I recommend this book for anyone looking for raw and emotional experiences relatable not only to those who have been incarcerated but to anyone ready to embrace humanity.

## 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**

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**M**ass 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.

# Review:

## *Don't Shake the Spoon*

By Exchange for Change (Ben Bogart, editor)

**Jennifer Anderson,  
Manton Chambers,  
Roland Dumavor,  
Caitlin Johnson,  
Matthew Norwood-  
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& Jennifer Rojas**

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In her essay “All I Have, a Lament and a Boast: Why Prisoners Write,” Bell Gale Chevigny (2005) laments, “neither they [the prisoners] nor society were as susceptible to change as I’d dreamed” (246). Yet, like the PEN Prison Writing Program, other programs have also begun to reach out a hand, with notebook and pencil, to those inside prison walls and encourage them to write. *Don't Shake the Spoon* is the product of one such program, Exchange for Change, conducted within the Miami-Dade county prison system. “We wanted to create a theme for this first volume that would center our writers on the notion of transformation that was important to our program,” recalls editor Ben Bogart (2018) in his introduction, “So our first call went out for works that addressed, simply enough, ‘change’” (4). Some writers focused on changes within themselves, while others aimed to change the society outside their walls. Some writers detailed how their experiences have changed their perceptions, and some wrote with the



hope to change the prison system itself. Such change is a visible thread stitching each story within the collection into a community of voices. This community building is the goal of *Exchange for Change*, and this collection of stories demonstrates the way in which writing has the ability to bring people inside and outside the prison system together in pursuit of enacting change.

In “The Me Who Is Change,” Roderick Richardson explores the arduous process of personal transformation. “Change starts as a seed,” he writes; from an impoverished youth to “a fully-devoted oak tree,” Richardson acknowledges the constant evolution of life (19). Throughout the piece, he grapples with a variety of concepts that one must embrace during the process of change. Still, he recognizes the struggle to remain intact during intense waves of change. By highlighting how change can manifest through forgiveness, love, hope, compassion, endurance, and personal reflection, Richardson evokes the relatable struggle of facilitating change in one’s life. However, he warns, “without change, a person can die and still be alive—a walking zombie with no emotional feelings on the inside.” Overall, he embodies and craves change. For him, “change is wishing for change” (21).

The authors of the selected texts employ evocative personal narratives that bring serious attention to the social injustice, loss, discrimination, and rejection that incarcerated people suffer in our societies. In “Change: The Power of its Momentum,” Waldo Hewitt calls for societies and cultures to open up to all peoples and be dynamic by promoting the spirit of togetherness, equality, love, and peace that foster positive development of humanity. He sees change to be contingent on the society’s ability to rid of cultural and societal norms that breed hate and war (50). The theme of society as an agent of change is heightened in Luis Aracena’s “The Show.” As he reflects on the essence of the “5000 Role Models” program, Aracena calls on the reader to witness how the younger generation that lacks guidance and counselling—“redemptive H.O.P.E.”—from elders end up making “poor choices” (81) that lead them to prison. He further reminds the reader that the society is responsible for molding the younger generation into useful members, but they seem to have reneged on their duty. Aracena uses biblical allusion and irony to

satirize the society that demonizes the incarcerated and to motivate himself and others in his situation to embrace change by taking up the responsibility that the adults in the society have failed to perform. He finds it self-fulfilling to be one of “the demons that are giving advice to angels in how to avoid coming to hell . . . cheating Satan by depopulating Hades” (82).

Aracena’s work appears several times throughout the collection, and each piece maintains a similar theme even as he shifts focus from societal change to personal change to change within the criminal justice system. In “Greater,” he discusses prisoners’ pursuit of positive changes with the limited means and opportunities behind bars, promoting the creative instruction and support provided by Exchange for Change workshops. Aracena describes changes in his own perspective on fellow inmates following his participation in the writing program, seeing creative potential rather than threat potential, and also suggests that these workshops allow prisoners to “enlighten and educate the public, and at the same time introduce positive change into the penal system” (94), demonstrating just some of the potential benefits of this type of prisoner education (for inmates themselves and for the outside world).

In Francois Richardson’s “The Parallels of Change,” education again comes into play; using an extended analogy of President Barack Obama as “Mr. Change,” leader of a politician superhero team, he notes Obama’s influence on the popularity and connotations of the word “change” and outlines several accomplishments of the administration, comparing detractors’ refusal to acknowledge the evidence of these victories to “the disbelief that most of society holds about change in prisoners” (29). Noting the inevitability of change and the necessity of making it progressive, Richardson calls directly upon departments of corrections to help prisoners make positive personal changes by making the systemic change of compulsory prisoner education. Together, these pieces shed light on how certain changes in the criminal justice system—namely, educational opportunities of some type—can help inmates develop as individuals, thereby shifting societal expectations of prisoners and their ability to be rehabilitated.

This overarching theme also appears in Christopher Malec's "Sandwich Crusts." Malec weaves a nonlinear narrative between his time in prison, his youth, his negotiation of young adulthood, and the liminal places where navigating a systematic tightrope with no net beneath renders him. The nonlinear structure deftly transitions a reader between a larger cultural narrative and Malec's personal experience moving through the injustices of incarceration systems. He evokes the ability of language and narrative to offer migration to a person's perspectives across borders, to pull a person into the lived details of reprieve, distrust, somnambulance, and the systems that work to position a person there.

Like the title piece, "Don't Shake the Spoon," Malec's narrative arcs around the sustaining force of having food amid questions of whether its presence is secure or tenuous. When Malec is five or six, he discerns that biting around each side of a sandwich will incentivize other kids not to ask him to share his lunch. As he grows older, the habit remains, but the reason behind it alters; biting the crusts becomes "an homage to a reprieve once savored in the midst of a bitter experience; the one part of the memory's palette that remained numb as you chewed the present into a swallowed past" (68). Biting the outer edges of sandwich crusts links the dimensions of Malec's past and present transformations of perspective. Through immersive, often prose-like imagery, he seems to offer readers perspective into what it means to have the respite of food among such insecurity and what it means to want to share a bite of a sandwich with another. In doing so, he poses a larger question about whether change might be enacted to offer a net—or a bite—to those marginalized by U.S. systematic structures of oppression.

The stories contained within *Don't Shake the Spoon* speak to both the change the authors have witnessed in their own lives and change they hope to create. In the introduction, we, as the audience, are called to consider what role we play, and this question permeates nearly every piece in the text in the hope that, much like the workshops these authors participate in, the pieces will "enlighten and educate the public" (94). These authors do not allow us to simply observe their writing; we are asked to become part of the change that they discuss. This engagement is exactly why the collection is so powerful. Though

each piece may be read individually, reading the pieces together is valuable because these authors are writing to bridge a gap between their community and the non-incarcerated. Exchange for Change exists to foster relationships between two very different communities, and this collection allows an opportunity to look through different lenses and think about how one might position themselves.

*Don't Shake the Spoon* carves out space for new voices to add to the ongoing conversation about prison literature and writing, allowing those with experience in prison to directly involve their ideas. Exchange for Change has carefully selected and organized their initial publication with pieces that reflection their mission. *Don't Shake the Spoon* is a testament to the creativity and endurance of the human spirit.

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# Life's Song

**E. Paris Whitfield**

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I'm a song that has yet to be sung,  
My melody is struggling to be played,  
My lyrics are unwritten,  
wanting of an unfamiliar page.

Tune, still subliminally sublime.  
A bitter flatness enfolds my existence,  
a crueler reality, the latter, to realize.

My keys somewhat broken, white, black,  
unsequenced.

My smile buried inside itself  
Even as hopes embers burn within my eyes.  
No more tears left to lick up against the gates  
of impassive time,  
Ears grasping the empty winds to hear any  
signs of Tomorrow's breath.

Consequences being no coincidence,  
As soon as I ceased worrying,  
the moment *I* step aside of myself, and  
loosened my talon grip on those  
controls that I never genuinely controlled,

something most extraordinary begun to play through my soul,  
Life's symphony.

It has been through being lost, trapped, suffocated within adversity, my  
life's song has found a succession of musical tones.

With pen in hand, Today is writing.  
Carefully, cautiously, I am persevering  
finding solace in uncertainty that my end's note will resound higher  
than my beginning's.







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