

# Tobi Jacobi

## Foreword

### "I'm just gonna let you know how it is" Situating Writing and Literacy Education in Prison

"I'm not gonna sit and preach to anyone  
because I myself have been in and out of these doors 12 times.  
I'm just gonna let you know how it is"  
"To the Girls at the Audy" by Irene Sanchez (17)

In ten-week creative writing workshops held at Chicago's Cook County Jail, Irene Sanchez and other participants write poems, stories, and life narratives around a wooden conference table in the small women's tier library. Under the direction of DePaul University professor Ann Folwell Stanford, several sessions in this particular workshop were devoted to fostering a dialogic writing exchange between the women in the jail and girls held at the county's temporary juvenile detention center. Pointing to the rigor of prison life, Sanchez' poem continues, "There's no more sleeping all through the night,/ and no more sleeping late./ Doors open at 2:30am for breakfast,/ and again at 7:30am to begin the day./ You do what you're told; never what you want./ Get up, go to bed! When they want" (17). Incarcerated teen M.H. responds, offering an abbreviated truth that moves her far beyond her adolescent years: "Roses are red/ Violets are blue/ You're in jail/ And I am too" (24). These lines offer readers a perspective on prison life rarely reported in media sound bites, a seldom heard inter-generational exchange between two writers who are all too familiar with the material realities that accompany what prison activist Marc Mauer has aptly called our American "race to incarcerate."

Let me offer another snapshot. *A concrete corridor. The echo of footsteps down a silent and well-monitored hall. The moan of steel doors whining open and closed, marking the passage between freedom and regime. Filing contraband scarves, pencils, and spiral notebooks away in a locked desk. The worn shrug of a guard or, worse yet, a smirk tossed to another do-gooder who gets to go home.* For those of us who claim the privilege of traveling in and out of the razor wire, these are common images. Such impulses to communicate the material challenges and realities of accessing and teaching incarcerated students permeate much of the available scholarship on prison literacy and education. Yet stories

and physical descriptions like these rarely reveal the complexities of negotiating student and teacher agency in prisons, spaces shaped by many stakeholders with disparate goals and interests. Conveying the complexities of “how it is” for prison writers and teachers, then, is our broad aim in compiling the narratives, reflections, and analyses that make up this extended issue of *Reflections*.

Further, though we have made significant strides in honoring student voice and agency in our university writing classrooms, it is far too recently that incarcerated writers like Irene Sanchez have had the opportunity to tell us “how it is” in prison through their own words. Thus, a second goal of this special issue is to make space in an academic journal for prison writers and their writing. When soliciting writings from prisons, we did not inquire about writers’ backgrounds or circumstances, nor did we ask contributors to write about their crimes; rather, we respect writers in prison as storytellers and theorists who have multiple and varied stories to share. As members of society who are often relegated—literally—to shadows of our public imagination, incarcerated writers were invited to use this space as an opportunity to reflect upon the conditions of their time inside, their life circumstances, and their future plans. Such contributions, along with the labor of an untracked number of teachers who encouraged writers to submit writing based on their own prompts and activities, has led to a collection of writings that move from autobiographical narratives and critiques of unethical and inhumane prison living conditions to reflections on life behind bars and philosophical treatises on the American penal system. In creating this hybrid space for academic texts and prison writings to weave together a collaborative and reflective narrative, we invite teachers, scholars, and researchers to recognize prisons, jails, detention centers, and recovery programs as viable sites for literacy, writing instruction and community engagement.

### **Connecting Prison, Literacy, and Community Service Learning**

In her oft-cited article on the “extracurriculum of composition,” Anne Ruggles Gere has called for renewed attention to literacy education facilitated in sites beyond our traditional classrooms. Many have answered by reporting on their research in workplaces, community centers, shelters, and in other urban environments that defy fixed geography. As I began researching access to prison writing opportunities several years ago, I was surprised by the number of my composition and rhetoric colleagues who had teaching ties to prisons since little scholarship is available to help contextualize the complexity and significance of this work. Though inadequately documented, teachers and scholars across a wide range of disciplines have developed service learning projects in prisons for university courses. As teachers emphasize experiential learning and the benefit of reflective thinking through such efforts, prisons have become sites for collaborative learning and the application of various pedagogies. In an application of

Tom Deans' now familiar classification of writing "about, for and with" community partners, students work as tutors, writing and drama workshop facilitators, and co-inquirers into questions of social research (e.g. racial inequity in prison) as they exchange writing with people in prison. These relationships are often marked by familiar print-rich service learning practices, as students collaborate on creative texts, work through problem-based literacy learning, and keep journals and write papers on their interactions. Such designs attempt to balance the community needs of prison administrators and incarcerated participants with the constraints of higher education (semesters, for example) by creating projects that range from a series of workshops inside to a semester-long tutoring commitment to an ongoing project such as Stanford's "Women, Incarceration, and Writing Project" at DePaul University. Since both prisons and universities create somewhat transient populations, a balance of careful training and flexibility have proven successful for many programs. However, these programs need a bit of "troubling" if we are to improve the ways we engage in service learning work with writers inside.

As several contributors here make clear, connections between community service learning and prison literacy remain both productive and tenuous. As my co-editor Patricia O'Connor writes in the Afterword of this issue, prisons have maintained rocky relationships with educational programming facilitated primarily through unpaid teachers affiliated with universities, non-profit agencies, or faith-based organizations over the past fifty years. The access granted to teachers has depended largely on, first, the establishment of strong relationships of mutual respect and collaboration between teachers and prison administrators, and second, on increasingly threatened public support for reform and rehabilitation through education.

Additionally, many of the ethical concerns posed by traditional service learning, particularly questions of sustainability and reciprocity, are heightened in prison contexts. As Ellen Cushman has argued, "Professors in service learning initiatives garner trust from community members, at least in part, when they show a consistent presence in the community and an investment in creating knowledge with and for community members" (58). The red tape involved in navigating official prison discourse and policy demands increased responsibility for teachers and researchers who design collaborative prison-university learning experiences. Reciprocity, a term theorized by many service learning practitioners, is much more difficult to measure in prison settings since the consequences for incarcerated participants potentially entail a great deal more risk than for traditional "free" students who have the luxury of grappling with problematic concepts in a university classroom or through a written assignment. My own journey as a community service learning practitioner has been marked by tensions as I have worked to develop meaningful (rather than equal) reciprocities across

participants (See Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi), and prison work has added to the complexity of these designs. Figuring out what it means to shift “how it is” is a ready question all practitioners engaging in prison-university collaborations must engage.

The challenges of adapting service learning pedagogies and methodologies to prison have also inspired teachers to construct alternative spaces for experiential education that move beyond direct contact with those in prisons and jails. Co-authors Jonathan Hayden and Arvilla Payne-Jackson demonstrate how graffiti in the now closed Washington D.C. area Lorton Prison represents a genre of hidden literacies claimed by inmates even in spaces of vast power differentials and exaggerated social control. As Lisa Mastrangelo reports, linking first year writing with a prison book project offers a model for engaging writing students with issues of incarceration and gender that results in material changes for women in prison. Along with traditional tutoring and writing collaborations, service learning experiences like these potentially extend and challenge the educations of people both inside and outside prison walls; further, they can move mandated rehabilitation toward practices of resistance and social justice as inmates are encouraged (cautiously) to consider the oppressive material conditions to which our current social and penal system contribute. While not all prison literacy and service learning work forwards an interest in social justice, this special issue highlights the depth and breadth of the direct and indirect work our peers, students, and activist citizens are engaging in within the U.S. prison system.

### **Understanding Contexts for Prison Literacies**

Two national studies of prison literacy conducted in the mid-nineties offer a portrait of the educational backgrounds and needs of people in the U.S. prison system. *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, one in a series of national literacy surveys conducted the U.S. Department of Education, found that prisoners’ basic literacy rates are significantly lower than their free peers and that “thirty-six percent of inmates reported having at least one learning disability” (Haigler et al.). In an analysis of over 3,000 documents related to literacy instruction in prison, *Prison Literacy: Implications for Program and Assessment Policy* characterizes literacy abilities as the completion of traditional schooling (grades 1-12) or GED courses. However, in making recommendations to prison administrators, legislators, and educators, the study outlines a more progressive and critical model based on criteria for program development such as learner-driven designs, cost-effectiveness, improved access to resources and technology, and increased quality of life (Newman et al. 47). In line with many in composition studies committed to increasing access to literacy learning, this study embraces “literacies” that are defined as social/cultural literacies, occupational literacies,

and body (health-related) literacies (48). These categories are particularly important for incarcerated learners who struggle with different issues of family, relationships, health, and education than their counterparts in the free world.

Although proponents of the 1995 ban on prisoner access to Pell Grants deny the correlation between access to educational advancement and successful re-entry into society, a significant number of studies suggest otherwise. For example, Steurer, Smith, and Tracy's 2001 analysis of the relationship between education and recidivism demonstrates that correctional education resulted in lower re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration rates (48) and calls for increased support for education "beyond basic education and GED preparation to prepare offenders for successful reentry back into their communities" (47). Despite the obvious need for increased literacy training evidenced by these studies, funding for and access to sustained education programming has virtually disappeared over the past ten years. The disparity between such calls for programmatic revision and current support for sustainable prison programming makes visible the need for public awareness and critique of current conditions. It is not surprising, then, that many of the programs presented and analyzed in this volume function primarily through the efforts of one faculty member or a small team of educators and students and are funded through volunteer efforts or grant monies rather than institutional support.

In addition to required GED/ABE classes, the following categories offer snapshots of the wide range of literacy opportunities and community service learning collaborations that educators are currently working to institutionalize (or not!) in prisons and jails around the country. While we might debate the usefulness of programmatic boundaries, here the categorization progresses from traditional courses that define literacy as reading and writing toward programs that blend such basic skills with critical literacies.

**GED and ABE classes:** Current literacy education efforts focus primarily on helping incarcerated students achieve GED certification or other job skills. While there have been a handful of classes documented that incorporate critical literacy into functional literacy programs (See Boudin), most classes focus on increased basic print literacy skills. Access to GED courses is federally mandated, and in many institutions, literacy work is limited to this kind of basic training. Although such work often consists of workbook training that follows the national standard established by the format and content of the GED, students in prison often face increased challenges to completing the program. Learning disabilities and prisons' poor capacity to diagnosis and address them, as Terra White, a GED tutor and undergraduate participant in Georgetown University's prison outreach program for the past three years, reports in her essay, "Learning Disabilities among the Incarcerated Population," create inadequate learning conditions for many prison students. Access to GED tutoring and curriculum

is vital to many low level literacy students; service learning collaborations can offer inmates with negative associations with schooling and/or learning disabilities the personal attention necessary for educational advancement.

**College Classes:** As scholarship demonstrates the social and economic value of increased access to education, a slow but steady renaissance of prison college coursework is emerging out of the defunding of college programs in the 1990s. Michelle Fine et al.'s 2001 collaborative study, *Changing Minds: The Impact of College in a Maximum-Security Prison*, for example, effectively argues that access to higher education and writing projects at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility results in reduced recidivism and productive reentry into public life. In this volume, Phyllis Hastings' discussion of prison-college composition courses models how writing students in both prison and traditional college classrooms can benefit from linked learning experiences and writing processes. While courses like Hastings' largely remain an anomaly, they provide an important model for institutions ready to renew interest in education as a rehabilitative measure and instill hope in incarcerated populations that are long ready to move beyond the mandated GED courses. The ongoing challenge in this period of economic tension remains translating public support for education into material opportunities for advanced (or even critical) literacy learning.

**"Each One, Teach One":** As well as serving as one of the founding principles of the Laubach Literacy International (now ProLiteracy WorldWide), "each one, teach one" functions as a mantra for many prison educators. A growing number of institutions grant inmates access to educator roles once they have gained the trust of the administration. We highlight the work of incarcerated writer Leonard Gonzalez and his essay on initiating a poetry workshop in the Redwood City County Jail to demonstrate how writing classes and workshops might overcome budgetary and social conservatism through "insider" work. This kind of prison literacy work has been successfully employed to extend opportunities for critical literacy work *across* basic and advanced coursework. As longtime inmate-teacher-activist, Kathy Boudin, asks: "Would it be possible in a prison classroom to create conditions for self-awareness, a space where people felt safe to identify and address their own problems and then struggle toward solutions, to imagine the world as it could be otherwise?" ("Participatory" 184). Boudin developed a critical literacy model of basic education for her co-inmates and later a nationally recognized critical literacy AIDS education and Mothering in Prison project at Bedford Hills. In addition to demonstrating the propensity of many incarcerated people to "do" their time as teachers, Boudin's programs navigate the fine line between sanctioned and illicit literacy work, forwarding prison policies and socially driven moral agendas for reform as well as cultural critique of those same social institutions.

**Dialogic Exchange:** Working with varying levels of institutional support,

programs like the jail-juvenile detention center exchange highlighted at the beginning of this Foreword foster dialogue across communities. Three essays in this issue demonstrate such dialogue and pedagogical innovation in the tradition of Linda Flower's intercultural inquiry. Tom Kerr's essay theorizes his work with resistant upper division college students and their letter exchanges with incarcerated women and men across the country in his Writing and Resistance course at Ithaca College. Lori Pompa reports on critical literacy learning in her well-established "Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program" which engages Temple University students in active inquiry with participants in local prisons. And Lauren Ehrlichman chronicles her experiences as an undergraduate participant in the Trenton-based "People and Stories" prison book discussion group. These kinds of relationships and programs offer teachers and scholars methods for designing and participating in community writing and learning. Premised upon collaborative inquiry across inmate-university populations, they mirror grass-roots education rather than hierarchical top down models that impose a predetermined agenda upon prison participants.

**Writing and Drama Workshops:** Although seldom granted college credit, creative writing and drama workshops have maintained a strong presence in prisons and jails. Workshops often meet weekly for between four and ten weeks and offer participants opportunities to write and perform their ideas outside of the traditional teacher-student paradigm. We open this issue with Laura Rogers' collaborative account of the fiction, poetry, and memoir work of male writers at Forest Correctional Facility, an analysis that pushes readers to grapple with both the complexities of facilitating volunteer programs and the risks that accompany prison writing. Carolyn Benson's reflective poem "Moon" complements Rogers' essay by illustrating the visceral experiences of leading workshops, the push and pull of exchanging emotions through bars. Drama workshops, such as Rhodessa Jones' phenomenal *Medea Project*, offer inmates alternative methods of working through their histories and social positions by encouraging written journals, improvisation, and collaborative workshops. In this issue we highlight the work of two such program facilitators: Tim Mitchell and Lorraine Moller. Mitchell describes his work with incarcerated youth and theorizes Boal theatre methods and activities as a way of linking drama to problem-based conflict and the development of trust and self-awareness. Moller presents her work with *Rehabilitation through the Arts*, an inmate-run theatre program, and the production of the final play at Sing Sing before funding for the project was cut. Like many of us committed to service learning pedagogies, Moller grapples with the issues of sustainability that often mark the difference between a community project's ultimate success or failure. Writing and drama projects in prison represent some of the most hopeful places for incarcerated writers to re-imagine their lives and understand how life circumstances can pro-



vide fodder for critical inquiry and growth.

As the essays in this issue argue, university- and community-based service learning relationships with prison literacy contexts have much to offer current revisions in prison education as well as our own thinking as teachers of writing across multiple contexts. Still, this somewhat celebratory list must end with a cautionary note. While I am awed by the creativity and commitment of my peers and their often innovative programs, it is important keep the limited availability of such programming in mind. Often institutions offer incarcerated people little beyond federally mandated GED classes. Many inmates express enthusiasm for proposed programs that will accommodate their advancing skills or creative knowledge only to discover that the path beyond the GED remains gated. For those of us on the other side of the bars, their desire is a call to action.

As we respond to this call, the critical literacy work of New Literacy Studies scholars (see Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, Hull and Schultz; Street) can help us examine how Brian Street's claim that literacy as an ideological construct, "inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (433), is enacted in prison contexts. My experience teaching lifewriting in a county prison and subsequently researching models for women's writing workshops affirms that it is possible to create what De Certeau calls "practiced places" (130), strategic locations where workshop practices shift the authoritarian gaze of the prison and claim a space of their own. Like Boudin, I contend that incarcerated writers and learners have the capacity to engage in complex cultural critique while building creative and workplace writing fluencies. In my lifewriting classes, women brought in prison satire, escapist fiction, freestyle poetry, journals, and reflective and painful memoirs on carefully printed (or quickly scrawled) loose leaf sheets of paper (one such memoir numbered sixty pages in length). Such work results in literate actions that assert ownership over narratives that have historically been told *to* rather than *by* incarcerated peoples, a set of practices I have elsewhere termed "contraband moments." As De Certeau suggests, "What the map cuts up, the story cuts across" (129).

Yet, there are significant material differences between encouraging critical literacy in prison and in the free world; to act we need to understand some of the risks involved in navigating literacy work that is both sanctioned and contraband. In prison any perceived challenge to authority is an emotional, psychological, and potential physical risk. Seemingly insignificant actions that become disciplinary violations cause students to miss classes and workshops. Standard teaching tools must be screened and some, like pencils and spiral notebooks, are deemed contraband. Work time is cut short or cancelled at a moment's notice. Discussions of unresolved legal matters (difficult themes to avoid like parenting or relationships) can result in a group or teacher subpoena. These challenges become a testament to the commitment of teachers who con-



tinue to walk through steel doors after funding has been cut, to the learners inside who must reconstruct writings that have been confiscated as potential threats to the power structure. Teaching and learning in prison becomes a site for tension between institutional power and resistance based in language. In this sense, prison writings and other literate practices blur the boundaries between sanctioned educational activities and contraband actions. Such risks (and our complicity in requesting them) help us understand the complexity of literacy learning by asking us to examine the consequences of engaging critical literacies in all “extracurricular” learning contexts.

Despite these risks, many writers confined to the prison system are committed to circulating visual and print texts to their peers and families, in anthologies and on the internet, and through activist gatherings and university course readings. As workshop leader Ann Folwell Stanford claims, “Writing, an act of resistance to dehumanization, becomes a powerful way to put back together one’s story, to make sense of a frequently senseless experience, and to create solidarity through the sharing of those stories with others” (3). As community service learning facilitators, we need to listen carefully to the voices of administrators, funders, incarcerated writers, and co-facilitators inside and out, despite the sometimes contradictory sounds that emerge. As writing teachers, we are challenged to make sense of administrative curricular expectations and the needs and desires of incarcerated people who are seldom granted permission to speak or be heard. As educators, it is our responsibility to cultivate collaborative and public means for designing, critiquing, and revising “how it is.”

### **Navigating this Issue**

The seeds of this project were born out of *Reflections* Editor Barbara Roswell’s keen observation that small but committed groups of teachers and scholars were actively engaging with prisons as sites for literacy education and reporting on that work at our national and regional conferences. Since we are scattered across the country in multiple fields, at varied institutions, and position our prison work within a wide range of subjectivities, this special issue has been two years in the making. Our initial call for essays went out in the summer of 2002 and was heard by a handful of scholars, activists, and teachers. We renewed our efforts in 2003 by casting our net more widely to reach colleagues in disciplines ranging from English and Arts Education to Speech Communication and Political Science. We simultaneously tapped our connections with local, regional, and national correctional facilities, issuing invitations to inmates, administrators, and counselors to submit work that reflected their ‘insider’ status.

We received well over two hundred scholarly and creative submissions. The challenge of narrowing this pool of writing involved several months of careful reading and analysis. Through a rigorous selection process, we chose eleven

scholarly essays and twenty-eight prison writings based on their scholarly merit, narrative and reflective quality, representation of available programming, and ability to make visible many of the issues faced by people in prison. In addition to publicizing these critical and creative writings, we hope this issue will function as a resource for teachers, scholars, and activists interested in making prison issues a part of their work. We solicited reviews of recent books from both free and incarcerated people in order to represent a wide dialogue on current prison conditions and calls for reform. Throughout the issue, resource pages list recommended readings and media sources for incorporating critical prison issues into classroom dialogues as well as contact information for several current prison education projects that might function as models and starting points for service learning work. As Co-Editor Patricia O'Connor argues in the Afterword, prison education and writing projects occupy tenuous positions in terms of economic, moral, and functional support; as writing teachers and service learning scholars we are well-equipped and situated to facilitate change.

Finally, the issue is designed to accommodate both the linear and nonlinear reader. The scholarly essays and prison writings have been organized according to theme and paired in complementary ways that allow each piece to illustrate the relationship between academic theorizing and insider lived experience. We invite readers to engage with these reflections and essays as we have organized them or to proceed with an alternative design. Our hope is that these writings will inform, disturb, inspire, and challenge readers to recognize both the diversity of literacy work occurring in our nation's prison system and the emergent voices of imprisoned women and men. As practitioners who recognize the problems and possibilities of prison literacy work, we encourage readers to participate in university-prison relationships or direct prison interactions and thereby to add their own set of complex texts and landscapes of knowledge to the conversations we offer here.

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