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Afterword
Rewriting the Story of Prison Literacies

Service learning as a pedagogy and its partner, community based research, have both made productive interventions into prison and jail life, greeted many times with relief by administrative staffs no longer funded for what some politicians call the "extras" of education. From the inside, administrators and inmates join those on the outside—ex-inmates, educators, concerned family members, students and other citizens—to stimulate intellectual and practical engagements between the separated communities that prison engenders. Many of the activities and programs discussed in these pages have started new conversations that reach beyond the walled and barred "homes" of the incarcerated.

In this volume we have had a rare opportunity to bring together the work of a remarkable group of educators working to improve the quality of life and minds inside prisons and jails. Some, formal teachers, work in the prison system as an endangered species—easy prey to voracious budgetary cutbacks. Others, like myself, my co-editor Tobi Jacobi, and others in this volume, volunteer as teachers and outreach workers—outsiders who bring courses and workshops into walled and barred communities. Another group, often underestimated in their impact on literacy and community building inside prisons, are inmates who instruct each other both formally through inmate-managed workshops and also, individually, by personal example in their creative arts and letters and in their participation in and promotion of education. What we find, then, in this volume composes a greater narrative than the individual stories or products from each writer about her or his experiences inside or with prisons and jails. This volume's inclusion of poetry, personal essay, academic voice, reflective experience, memoir, short story, photography, and drawing creates a hybridized and thus strengthened experience for the reader who examines these pieces. No one of these writers had the overview, the positioning, that you do now as a reader to appreciate the combined impact of these efforts. You can discern the overarching umbrella narrative within which each of these accounts shelters. You also are uniquely positioned to do something with this story.

Power of Story

Composition teachers, narrative theorists, linguists, criminologists, and cognitive psychologists, to name a few of those concerned with prisoners, all have found that formation of our stories has made significant impact on the understanding of human behavior. Composition theorist Robert Scholes associates the importance of "telling" to cultural understanding when he writes that "narrative is not just a sequencing, or the illusion of a sequence. Narrative is a sequencing of something for somebody" (209), a way to reach others with the story of our experiences. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner considers narrative, along with logico-scientific understanding, one of the two natural kinds of reasoning. He suggests that in autobiography the speaker subjunctivizes his experience by contemplating what might have been, not merely telling what happened. Linguist Wallace Chafe sees narratives as "windows to both the content of the mind and its ongoing operations" (79). The research I conducted in life stories of prisoners suggested that the telling of one's experiences as victim or as criminal assisted in situating the current life in respect to the past acts creating "fruitful pathways" to necessary introspection (O'Connor, *Speaking* 172). Criminology professor Stanley Cohen has asserted that the larger stories of social control situate us within competing accounts. He describes "uneven progress" as we have made reforms, noting "benevolence gone wrong" during our efforts to rehabilitate, and an increasing "mystification" that conceals a return to former ways of punishment, all in the name of budget crises and profit motivations (104-109). The search for personal change through understanding and insight has been abandoned. Emphasis is now on a renewed behavioristic view of prison as a place where bodies, not minds are again the subjects of social control, where behavior alone is key and interest in "words, motives, attitudes, or personality" has waned (Cohen 122).

In this wary milieu we enter with the counter-stories suggested by those in this volume whose works, in sum, claim that connecting with the minds of the incarcerated ought to be the business of our communities. This hybrid resource on life inside prison shows a compelling power in narrative, one that can lead us to question how much more could be gained if we made more opportunities to interact in person in order to present how we each see ourselves in our disparate worlds. Might that presentation allow a collective and ultimately productive view of the inmate's struggle to come into society?

Synergy in Contributors' Views

Some of the prisoner writing we shared in this volume came from the wellspring of isolation and longing. Some showed reactions to well-suggested teacher prompts. Some created humor to lighten the load of the "long time" prison commands over its inhabitants. Some screamed in polemics; others drew

and painted their dreams, their desires. Many pieces from the over two hundred voices we collected from prison were left out, adding our own act of silencing to that macro act of isolation that jail and prison assert. We omitted generic, and yet no less meaningful, comments about "how I see now that I needed to change" or "stop the warehousing of people" and chose essays and poems and stories that particularized the experiences from which we readers might draw those very conclusions. All these writers, those included and those excluded, make up part of the means for understanding the continuing choice of America to select incarceration as a favored response to crime, in spite of its obvious interplay with recidivism and in spite of the illicit drug industry's power to recruit more and more willing victims. We saw that sad synergy in the long essay "Revolving Doors" by inmate Sabrina Smith. Smith's determination to change in each incarceration belied itself as she chronicled how she learned to live inside, to advance in the prison workforce, to survive a near fatal burning, only to return again and again to prison: and, yet, she writes this frank and hope-filled essay. The Bureau of Justice's most recent report on recidivism showed 67.5% of inmates rearrested within three years of release (Hughes and Wilson 1). Such a statistic gives credence to Smith's personal and visceral understanding of her returns.

Is Sabrina Smith's plight re-occurring in the fatalistic articulations from those in Illinois' home for youth offenders where one of the poems' speakers suggested the "system can't wait to see us on street corners, pushing our homes in a shopping cart" (Anastasio). We who have read these pieces find it hard to stop cringing when we hear the eloquently cadenced "At the age of seven/ I smoked my first square /I shot my first gun /I lost my first friend"(Curtis). We match it, too, with Deborah Smith's review of Wally Lamb's *Couldn't Keep It To Myself* in which the reviewer details her personal experience defending youth turned to "bad kids." Or, we compare Curtis's expression of youthful immersion in violence to Keesling's introduction to the Cook County youth poems that shows the barriers, big as boulders, to understanding such youth. The Bureau of Justice notes that the number of such juveniles in residential public and private custody was 108,931 on Oct. 27, 1999, the most recent published statistic on juvenile incarceration, a rate of 371 per 100,000 (Sourcebook 2002 485-86). As readers of these statistics, as listeners to these voices, these stories just beginning, these lives rebounding and resurfacing inside institutions, we are overwhelmed at the task set forth to reach us. The writers who answered this call for reflections have each attempted through individual acts—one letter-writing program, one classroom interaction, one drawing or photograph, one play performance at a time—to effect change in the individual lives seemingly lost inside the bars, razor wire, and concrete walls.

We begin to see, even in the names of the prison facilities included in each

of these accounts, the incredible scope of the local, state, commercial, and federal prison complex in America. We can appreciate the range by looking more closely behind the life of inmate artist William T. Lawson whose common prison trope of chained praying hands appears herein. Lawson has written me that he has served over 20 years of time on a life sentence and has been moved to county, federal and private-for-profit institutions in an amazing itinerary including: federal institutions in Lorton, Virginia; Leavenworth, Kansas; El Reno, Oklahoma; Terre Haute, Indiana; Oxford, Wisconsin; Atlanta, Georgia; Lewisburg, Pennsylvania; Sussex, Virginia; county facilities in Spokane, Washington, and Jamestown, ND; and Corrections Corporation of America facilities in Tennessee and Ohio (O'Connor, "Prison Cage" 83). Prison overcrowding has resulted in rental of prison beds and creation of entire facilities, part of an expanding prison industry that relies on out-sourcing of many services once contained within the government-run institutions. Prisons and criminal justice in general have become a burgeoning industry and new employer in many parts of America adversely impacted by industries moving abroad for lower wage rates. The voices we have heard show the disparities that come with these diverse systems of incarceration.

According to the most recent "Summary Findings" of the US Bureau of Justice, at end of year 2002, "6.7 million people were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole." This comprises "3.1% of all U.S. adult residents or 1 in every 32 adults." Of that group we hold 2.2 million people in prisons and jails in America ("Summary Findings"). I consciously use the pronoun "we" to personalize the moral agency in those claims for we are responsible for our legislated responses to crime and criminals. Our local, state, and federal taxes and our laws support massive incarceration in response to the cycles of crime. In 1996 the Bureau of Prisons spent $2.5 billion and states and the District of Columbia spent $22 billion on adult prisons with average annual operating expenditures reaching $20,100 per inmate (Stephan iv). The United States spent $146.5 billion in 1999 on its entire local, state and federal justice system (Trends). We are using huge resources for fighting crime and containing criminals. Are they promoting changed behavior? What might we as a community do to contribute to change?

Steps to Development

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed in the early part of the 20th century that we learn concept formation in Zones of Proximal Development that have a learner brought into personal understanding of a concept after becoming aware of it in a social setting. The learner next internalized that concept in her/his private thinking, bringing it forward in a public setting where it is either ratified and supported, or changed anew through the community uptake. The individ-

ual thus negotiates his or her understandings in community. By their design, prisons subdue criminals and remove them from the society they have harmed. By placing the criminal, however, within a milieu of those who can inculcate advanced understandings of criminal concepts, we have through these institutions created a most insidious Zone for Criminal Development. If a person incarcerated wishes to learn new concepts for understanding the circumstances of her or his life and ways, the prisoner is hard-pressed to locate such help. And yet it happens. Prisoner DaVetta Penn asked how she can weigh her role as a mother with "staying quiet" and being "Who I'm Is?" Inmate parent Jesus Vega plaintively crafted a "Telephone Conversation with Five Year Old" whose curious queries end with "Can we come and live with you?" Such concerns by parents and children for the losses they have sustained and will know permeate the narratives of the families fractured by prisons' demands.

We saw prisoner William Barfield sizing up the setting of inmates cast into roles of "Cell Warriors, Cranks, Prophets, Psychologists, and Racists" and suggesting insight into these positionings as a determiner of one's safety and sanity. Particularly charged are the many signs of racial and economic divides clearly depicted in narrative and in statistical reports. The Bureau of Justice notes that "at yearend 2002 there were 3,437 sentenced black male prisoners per 100,000 black males in the United States, compared to 1,176 sentenced Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 Hispanic males and 450 white male inmates per 100,000 white males" (Summary Findings). The U.S. Bureau of the Census has noted the growing poverty rate of children, of African-Americans and Hispanics, and of female-headed households in America. In its 1998 report "Population Profile" (based on prior statistical summaries of means-tested programs and income surveys), we find in 1995 that 11.2% of whites, 29.3% of blacks and 30.3% of Hispanics (of any race) lived in poverty in the US (40). The report showed that in 1993, 14% of Americans received subsidies: 10.6% whites; 35.5% blacks; 28.9% Hispanics and 42.9% of those in female-headed households of any race or origin ("Population Profile" 35). Average annual incomes for Hispanics of any race and blacks in 1995 were, respectively, $22,393 and $22,860 (38-39). In such settings, illicit means of work become attractive.

We observe that lure in a "Matrix" of interwoven understanding, in which poet Byron C. La Fleur reminds the "next player" how the vanity and greed that landed the prisoner inside will draw him there again. Yet inmate Leonard Gonzalez found that his fellow prisoners would join into poetry workshops after he explained he could "turn the beauty of the world into words you can share, words that can make your senses come alive," the same desire for how "we came to express ourselves" heard from Laura Rogers' Forest Correctional Facility poetry workshop participants.

We who have participated in fostering composition with and by inmates—whether it be spoken in drama workshops or written in poetry, letters, memoirs or stories—have provided an alternative space for development of articulations of concepts about the self, especially about the idea of an articulate and educated self, a need waiting to be addressed inside institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, forty percent of inmates in State prisons lack high school diplomas or GEDs, about twice the average for the non-incarcerated (Harlow 1). Harlow notes that prison staff have "concentrated educational services to those most in need of further learning" (6). "White, black and Hispanic male inmates ages 20-39" come into prison much less educated than their counterparts on the outside (Harlow 6) and are also more likely to have failed to complete high school than their older counterparts in prison (Harlow 7). Terra White's article on learning disabilities in this issue speaks directly to the difficulty of providing adequate services to a prisoner population less educated and harder to teach, and a system with fewer resources to meet needs. More frightening are the unaddressed needs of the mentally ill and hopelessly despondent as we saw in inmate Thomas Schilk's *They Said*. Like Schilk, we too stand motionless in the face of inmate suicide. According to the Bureau of Justice, in 1997 alone 159 state and federal prisoners died by suicide ("Correctional Populations" 91). Thus, the researchers, educators and writers published here demonstrate not only the need for, but also the benefit of, expanded and varied literacy work to encourage not only minimum standards of passing a test for General Educational Development (GED), but a different measure of effective communication through a wide array of the arts that tap into self expression and can encourage self-development.

All of this work reveals 1) the role that acts of literacy play in daily living within confinement and 2) confinement's impact on society. These points need not always be made with pathos as we saw in undergraduate Lauren Ehrlichman's "What Lies Between Us" where she depicted her nervousness at going for the first time to volunteer. She realized she had driven several miles to the prison with her emergency brake on, a powerful metaphor for our community-wide resistance to going inside. In inmate Fred Berthoff's humorous short story, "High Crime Area," we find his character Rick's ironic take on millionaire drug smugglers reduced to hiding clandestine commissary chicken wings inside their pants. Rick determines to try his own hand at bringing out the object of his desires: "a load of whole wheat bread" for redistribution as peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, regaling readers with his deft touch on prison design flaws, zealously attentive guards, and simple desires. Berthoff's humorous observations are matched by the equally perceptive inmate writer Hector Gallegos. who suggests in "Black Winged Stranger" all the hope that a flying insect can bring when it breaks into the prison. Gallegos reveals the compassion of an inmate

who would barter a precious book of stamps for the release of the rare damselfly. Passion for freedom, passion for understanding, and passion for expression intertwine in these works from which we as readers can gain a larger perspective on a community biography too complex to reduce to one mood or mode.

Severing Time

Much of what we have read here shows the impact of prison on the life of each of us who have spent time inside. Like the inmates, I have grown old "serving" my twenty years as an educator and outreach mentor joining Georgetown University's students and faculty to the lives inside prisons[1]. Sixteen of those years of college courses were spent once a week going inside Washington, DC's complex of maximum and medium security prisons located at Lorton, Virginia. Since their close and the prisoners' dispersal in a strange diaspora reflected in postmarks from all over the U.S., we have moved our program now to the front end of incarceration. We teach inside a local jail in Arlington County, Virginia, welcomed as we learn new choruses to the songs of service learning's necessary bureaucracies: new regulations on travel and van use from our campus, higher clearance cautions and background checks in a post 9-11 metro area facility. I hear from former prisoners and tutors in a strange harmony: "I'm out now. I came to tell you I have never forgotten"; "I'm looking for work"; "I'm worried: law school and corporate work may be changing me." In service learning with the incarcerated we have severed time for a few moments each occasion we interacted; we broke the isolation and shared information about disparate lives.

In this volume we read how inmate Adam Ortiz saw origins and his incarceration interact. In "Looking Down to See Up: A Prison Epiphany" he recalled a fight he had with several young men as a result of discrimination in his youth: "...the Chicano in me says this is where the struggle with self began. A struggle with not being able to establish an identity. Always being pushed and pulled in different directions, never being able to establish a dream of who I wanted to be." In many ways the programs devised and the resultant writings in this volume prepare the ground for planting such seeds of self, those searches for individual identity negotiated hard within these prison camps where standing up for a self means creating a self, a self much impacted by the narrow possibilities of confinement. In "The Making of 'The Return'" prison playwright Edward James navigates those small confines and overcomes the overly defined racial positionings established inside prison by creating a shadow theatre for a talented inmate's voicing of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X in his play about decision making. The surprise of his audience that a white man had taken all three voices delivered the universality of the messages for change found in his script. So, too, did Martin Mitchell and Lorraine Moller detail the difficulty of "simulating the real" through theatre exercises and per-

formances in such already over-dramatized spaces. We can see now the synergy in these pieces, though the writers themselves could only account for their observed moments. Their words and images mingle here, allowing us as readers to permeate the walls, breach the gates to appreciate these words, these pictures, these educators who reach out with a story too large for any one of us to tell, too important for any of us to remain silent. For small moments we have joined in the intersection of these autobiographies, merging lives in an unlikely space. We have, then, as readers become a strange company, a repertoire of players ready for another performance of the small stories that at the beginning of this essay I suggested sheltered under this umbrella of the larger narrative of a nation doing time.

Implications

A volume such as this carries implications. We who do this enriching work inside prisons—inmates, staff, and educators from outside and inside—can activate communities to work for changes that lead to reclaiming the lost resources so evident in the words and depictions contained in this volume. The worlds of violence and crime claim many lives, harm many more. Sr. Helen Prejean in her account of death row inmates and the families of their victims articulates well the pain that families feel when the "plight" of prisoners surfaces in public discussions. Prejean suggests that peace comes through the grace of understanding and taking responsibility as well as through the terrifying task of forgiveness. We who promote a new sort of literacy in and about prisons must also face the dilemmas that cycles of crime and retribution have brought forth. Through interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and research and through inter-community approaches we must address the diverse nature of the problems that face us in dealing with crime, its victims, its perpetrators, and the forces that come to bear on those who in their daily lives negotiate these dangerous spaces. As readers of this volume, we cannot ignore the disparities in income, race and opportunity, the same inequities we suggest must be overcome in our institutions of higher learning. Inside the educational programs described in these pages, inside the self-help workshops and creative efforts featured, we find evidence of seeds for a new matriculation, a dream no doubt.

In joining together communities for mutual understanding we may only be making a space for the articulations of the pain, for the specification of the puzzling that our stories of this work reveal, whether we speak from the inside of prisons or from movement back and forth between our communities. The narratives in this volume confirm the wide differences in ages, races, crimes, genders, ethnicities, laws, institutions, and approaches to rehabilitation programs even as people face the overwhelmingly same tasks of personal change in the face of myriad obstacles.

The growing warehouses of incarcerated human capital represent an enormous, wasted, human resource. Those who are represented by the voices and stories herein have made possible productive doubt, debate, and hope about finding solutions to the contributing causes of crime, the dangerous choices of citizens, and the sad repetitions of stays in institutions. These acts of literacy promotion represent a story in progress, one in which the easy solution of incarceration is showcased amidst the payoff of sustaining unpopular educational opportunities in prison. Whether through staff work or through volunteers' time, energy and expertise, we need to work together with the incarcerated to devise pathways to productive lives and re-claimed communities. Reciprocal education, modeled in service-learning encounters and showcased here with the hybrid mix of artists and writers in this volume, can voice but a small part of the grander social adjustments we must make, if we are to address the forces combining to send our citizens to the open arms of crime to find their solace. As educators—inmates, teachers, volunteers, and staff—we should take the cue and foster that work, speaking out and "Banging the Bars Together" as inmate Richard Pitt suggested, so that we can help re-write the story.

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