

Review:

Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, Eds.
***Women, Writing and Prison: Activists,
Scholars, and Writers Speak Out.***

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Women, *Writing and Prison* is a dangerous book. As one imprisoned writer, Boudicca Burning, puts it, “I write to tell my story in hopes that I move people to feel compassion” (Burning 219). Throughout this book there is an undercurrent of compassion, emotional appeals for the plight of the prisoner. This anthology, edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford, challenges societal and cultural assumptions about prisoners and prison life. As Stanford writes in the Introduction, “with the act of putting pen to paper, each writer defies and remakes the social constructions that have been made for her” (8). *Women, Writing and Prison* provides a multifaceted approach to prison writing, with selections from imprisoned and formerly imprisoned writers, as well as pieces by community activists and scholars who study prison writing. Even in terms of style, the book is multifaceted, with the stirring imagery of verse interspersed between narrative essays that at times straddle the border between fiction and nonfiction, life inside and life outside prison walls.

The writings in this volume, particularly those by prison writers, aim to shatter the institutional identities of prisoners. These prisoners write in order to show that they are not just numbers in a system, uniformed tenants in a cell block, wrongdoers who will pay for their crimes during and after their stay in prison. Writing is a means of defining oneself, and the politics of representation is a recurring theme in this collection of essays. This is why prison writer Taylor Huey writes in "Writing is My Way of Sledgehammering these Walls" that "writing began for me as a desire to be heard, to be accepted, but soon moved into a form of self-discovery that eventually became mind opening" (Huey 191). The transition in Huey's use of writing spans from arguing for social acceptance to defining the self. In "Good Intentions Aside: The Ethics of Reciprocity in a University-Jail Women's Writing Workshop Collaboration," Sadie Reynolds explains why she prefers to refer to the prison writers she works with as prisoners and not inmates (the preferred term of the prison staff), since the latter term "is sanitizing, euphemistic and depoliticizing" (Reynolds 106). Judith Scheffler argues that prison writing workshops produce writing that "exploits the therapeutic and rehabilitative potential of writing" and "questions authority; it is art as resistance" (Scheffler 179). The authority that Scheffler refers to is generally equated with the prison industrial complex but also includes popular depictions of prison life and prisoners. The imprisoned writers in *Women, Writing and Prison*, fight against these stereotypes, such as in "My Voice through a Deadbolt Door," where prison writer Crista Decker says "I write because I can be anyone or anything...I can confide my darkest secrets and not be judged by what I say...Writing is the mirror that lets me see my true self even when life has put me on a shelf" (Decker 71). Faced with a society that is convinced that all prisoners are guilty and deserving of their incarcerated fate and with the uncaring and dehumanizing rigors of segmented prison life, the prisoners in this volume write to define themselves. They write to show that they are people, with feelings, hopes, and dreams.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first, "Writing and Reclaiming Self," provides insider accounts of prison life with all of its indignity and disgusting details, interspersed with shorter pieces that explain what writing does for imprisoned writers. What is so striking about this section is the way that the prison writers don't

hold back in providing the vivid details of prison. They write in order to deal with the pain and anguish of prison; of the monotony of a life under strict control by people who have no respect for them. This section can be read as a challenge to popular depictions of women's prison, which, no doubt in deference to audience expectations, tend to blunt the edge of fear and shame that all prisoners must deal with. These writings are disturbing, but they *must* be disturbing because life behind bars is disturbing. Of particular interest in this section is Dionna Griffin's "This Ain't No Holiday Inn, Griffin: Finding Freedom on the Blank Page." Griffin's piece hits the reader with its sensory details of both the material shortages of prison life and the fear of transitioning from outside to inside.

In "Bridging Communities: Writing Programs and Social Practice," the spotlight shifts from imprisoned writers to scholars from a variety of fields who are interested in prison writing. The pieces in this section provide detailed accounts of prison writing exchange programs and analyses of the problems of exchanging writings with prisoners. One of the difficulties with these exchanges is understanding how to resolve the privilege enjoyed by one group of writers and the complete absence of that privilege experienced by the other group. I was first introduced to prison writing as a student in a graduate course in which we exchanged writing assignments with writers at a nearby women's prison through the Exchange for Change program. During the course of my exchanges, I had to be careful about flaunting the things that I could do with relative ease but which my correspondents could not. This proved to be a difficult balance, because the exchange partners did not want us to hold back and censor ourselves in our writing (even though we did have to follow certain conventions, such as protecting our identities using pseudonyms). Having the opportunity to exchange my writing with an exchange partner allowed me to appreciate the ways in which I can express myself in my writing and elsewhere, and how often I take that freedom of expression for granted.

Another concern related to prison writing programs is dealing with the unavoidable inequality between facilitators and workshop participants. It is easy, as Sadie Reynolds reminds us, for those on the outside "to reinscribe patterns of unequal power-racism, sexism,

heterosexualism” (Reynolds 112). Those directing prison writing programs may genuinely want to help the writers with whom they work. However, there is often an undercurrent of suspicion on the part of exchange partners in these workshops. The implication is that these workshops take place for academic credit, for research, perhaps even for fame on the part of the facilitator and not for the benefit of *all* participants.

It is for this reason that Reynolds wants her writing program to not provide charity or rehabilitation but instead solidarity (Reynolds 102). This isn’t easy to do. Reynolds concedes that, because access to prison writing is so guarded, she must act as if she accepts the (often degrading) institutional definitions of exchange partners in order to continue her work (104). The writing program I participated in included rules, many of which were questionable, about what both the graduate student writers and the exchange partners were allowed to reveal in their writings. If I did not follow the rules of not disclosing personal details and not asking my correspondent about her crimes, I risked having my work censored and even having the entire writing program dismantled. I was constantly aware of how tenuous the relationship between the prison and Exchange for Change must have been (and still is); how one transgression could lead to the revocation of our permission as students to read the work of the exchange partners. In a way, this isn’t very different (ramifications aside) from how one transgression, one breach of the law, can lead to years spent in prison.

The third section, “Writing, Resistance, and the Material Realities of U.S. Prisons and Jails,” returns to the realistic depictions of life behind bars and situates these accounts with a context with which the reader can better appreciate each piece. Judith Scheffler’s essay provides an historical overlook of the genre of women’s prison writing. Scheffler summarizes the average female prison writer of the past (roughly until the 1970s) as “relatively well educated, often elite or economically advantaged, and incarcerated for her conscience or beliefs” (Scheffler 176). This characterization is often at odds with the biographical details of the prison writers in this volume. Many come from disadvantaged backgrounds and many were incarcerated for “uninteresting” reasons like drug abuse or petty theft. Often, the

act which led to imprisonment wasn't the product of a philosophical underpinning or a concerted effort to bring about social change or justice. Instead, as Wendy Hinshaw and Kathie Klarreich bring up in the previous section, quoting a letter by an incarcerated writer participating in a prison writing exchange, imprisonment can be the result of "literally three seconds of a bad decision" (Hinshaw and Klarreich 141). These discrepancies suggest that our current notions of why people are imprisoned and of what prisoners are capable of artistically must be challenged. Prison writers, and perhaps prisoners in general, are less often freedom fighters and more often people who made a terrible mistake that they are still coming to terms with. For many of them, writing provides a means of helping them do this. This is what prisoner Taylor Huey means when she says that she writes "to figure out how we got here" (Huey 189).

Women, Writing and Prison is a welcome addition to the conversation on the intersections between community writing and prison writing. However, this book differs from others of the same genre such as Judith A. Scheffler's *Wall Tappings*, Jodie Michelle Lawson and Ashley E. Lucas's *Razor Wire Women* and *Interrupted Life*, by Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds and Ruby Tapia. What separates *Women, Writing, and Prison* from these edited works on prison writing is the focus on writing, particularly expressive writing. This is not to say that these other works do not *also* focus on writing. All of these texts include pieces by women in prison and writing by family, community members, activists and scholars, but *Women, Writing and Prison* in particular focuses on what writing can do for both the reader and the writer. This collection is part of a series that explores the value of expressive writing and life-writing, discussing both the value of this type of writing for the writer and valuable and practical methods for teaching it. This means that the audience of this book is not limited to prison writing scholars but for anyone interested in extending writing pedagogy and community engagement beyond university and prison classrooms. *Women, Writing and Prison* stresses the dynamic possibilities of community writing and service learning, and the book as a whole argues for why prison writing matters. Through discussions of privilege, identity formation, writing as healing and resistance, and through vivid imagery of the indignity of institutional life, this book rethinks the teaching of community writing practices. The selections in this book

show how writing becomes a way of communicating across boundaries of privilege. We can no longer continue to speak or let others speak for the growing number of imprisoned writers in the United States, no matter the reason for their imprisonment. This book proves that they have something to say, something worth listening to, in their writings.

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