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Against Infrastructure: Curating Community Literacy in a Jail Writing Program

Tobi Jacobi

This essay argues that while fostering individual and collaborative literacy can indeed promote self-awareness, confidence, and political awareness, the threat of emotional and material retribution is ever-present in jail, making the development of infrastructure challenging. Such reality compels engaged teacher-researchers to develop tactical methods for promoting literacy with limited social and material support from institutions that are primarily invested in compliant behavior. Rather than relying upon traditional models for building engaged university-community infrastructure in such contexts, I suggest a participatory curatorial model and explore the notion of curating a program within an ever-shifting set of artists, regulations, allegiances, and expectations.

Keywords: prison writing, participatory curation, reciprocity, activist literacy, jail

“Curators help us access and interpret our country’s collective memory.... Curators are worth fighting for. They help us remember, and they don’t let us forget.” (Allison Marsh and Lizzie Wade, “Collective Forgetting,” 55)

This essay begins behind bars with curation work that encourages storytelling, community building, and advocacy within a community writing program. It begins with writers who are trying to radically transform their worlds. Kya wrote six word memoirs of trauma and living in a car. She was released and visited my university class as a guest speaker. She was so nervous that she came drunk. A few years later she was back at the jail on a minor charge and spoke of the birth of her daughter. Raul wrote about his grandmother’s posole and his hunger to be with her. Jorie entered our program seasonally when the weather turned cold after she lost everything when her husband’s heart attack proved fatal. During the warmer months, she wrapped her journals in heavy black plastic and tucked them into the bones of giant cottonwoods near the river. JD’s epic critique of American values and lived practice took up long minutes at our spring reading. After a moment of silence, his listeners stood and cried for more.¹

What does it mean to curate stories written by confined writers? To curate is to look and look, and look again.² It is to listen, collaborate, rearrange, limit, and

imagine. It is to enable opportunities for engagement both shallow and deep—a quick spin through a gallery to see what is new, or a deeper commitment to learning an entire collection or historical period. In the SpeakOut! community writing workshops I direct in northern Colorado, curation begins with making space for exploration in a single workshop session and for the possibility of fostering interest in regular attendance or even a commitment to a particular genre or style.

Since 2005, the SpeakOut! writing workshops have been providing opportunities for adults and youth confined in a county jail or juvenile rehabilitation centers to explore writing in multiple ways: as an artistic form, as space for reflection or therapy, as a skill set, as a communication tool. Writers gather weekly in 90-minute workshop sessions designed for five to fifteen writers; they share current work, compose new pieces, and discuss the work of writing through sixteen-week sessions that run each spring and fall. In Spring 2016, six workshop series ran between February and May at the local jail, community corrections, and two teen facilities. Workshops are sponsored by the Colorado State University English Department's Community Literacy Center (CLC) and are facilitated by university and community volunteers, usually teams of four, who invite writers to explore how writing might represent their lives, interests, and theories about the world. This essay explores the challenge of institutional infrastructure for one jail writing program and offers literacy teachers, activists, and researchers a participatory curation model as an alternative to conventional expectations of growth and reciprocity. Curation functions not only as an opportunity to make space for new voices to claim attention through publication and circulation, but also as a way for participants in community literacy programs to co-sponsor when, where, and how the experience unfolds and enters the public sphere.

In many ways the SpeakOut! program³ has established some measure of infrastructure and stability. It has claimed and maintained institutional and curatorial space both on campus and within community sites like the jail. Writers and facilitators are supported through our resource library, online lesson plan/activity bank, newsletter, and informal mentoring. Funding for the CLC and the SpeakOut! program comes primarily from regional family foundations and other grant support. Twice annually, the *SpeakOut! Journal* offers a publication opportunity for writers and encourages the dissemination of stories beyond workshop walls. Staff share experiences and circulate online and print journals widely in order to counter dominant narratives of race and cultural tendencies toward crime and impossibly fixed gender identities, and assumptions about familial cycles, entrenched beliefs that have allowed generations of writers to claim space in the pages of our small journal.

The curation of narratives from confinement, then, operates across multiple platforms—on-site workshops, a website, a print journal—for varied publics, including writers, local facilitators, prison educators, local and global readers. Yet despite the real and presumed rigidity of scheduling and programming, sites of confinement are notoriously unstable for programs that aren't directly linked to security or primary operations. Those of us who are committed to rhetorical

and literacy-based work might argue that literacy and writing are primary to the future successes of confined people; too often, however, such programs are seen as extracurricular, privileged, and less rigorous/necessary/pragmatic/useful than maintaining physical and psychological control. We are inessential, dismissible, and easily canceled. We are scheduled into rooms that are too hot or too cold, with horrible acoustics, or so small that we can barely move once seated. The tools of the workshop are seen as dangerous objects: pens and pencils become weapons, lined paper is a liability, and a typewriter translates into a privileged use of time. In short, ten years of developing and directing a jail-writing program has fostered a tentativeness when claims to sustained infrastructure are made.

In *Gravyland: Writing Beyond the Curriculum in the City of Brotherly Love*, Steve Parks invokes de Certeau's "politics of the edge" as a means of understanding how and where change might occur within disparate institutions. A literacy initiative or university center, for example, might well function as a *strategic hub* on campus, Parks argues, while functioning as a *tactical partner* within the larger effort to combat, in our case, social indifference to mass incarceration in the United States (67). Literacy work behind bars heightens the need for dialogue between the strategic and tactical, one that I suggest can occur through curation. Rather than establish a strategic partnership between the university and sites of confinement that suffers debilitating blows when policies or needs change without warning, a curatorial approach to community literacy advocates a commitment to strategic and tactical participation in change through intentional and flexible design of programming, publication, and public engagement. We curate change by creating opportunities for groups that would likely not otherwise know each other to engage across writing exchanges and shared stories, to choose, as bell hooks advocates, "the margin as a space for radical openness" (Choosing 152). Writing from prison or jail positions writers--and perhaps those who read their work--firmly in the margins and on the politics of the edge since they are always already at risk. In the pages that follow, this essay articulates the challenge of maintaining conventional infrastructure behind bars and argues that a curatorial approach is one way to navigate the "political turn"⁴⁹ in community literacy theory and practice. Such flexible, tactical methods enable a conceptual infrastructure that leads to radical transformation for both individual writers and the social institutions, carceral or otherwise, that confine them.

Moving Toward Community Literacy Curation

Critical and activist pedagogues have long sought out the unrepresented writer in an effort to rewrite historical absence. In prison and jail writing programs this often inspires the birth of programs and a will to create a collection of writings and art for public dissemination. Curation offers community literacy practitioners one way to think through the uncertainties of infrastructure and program stability. I offer three

definitions as a way to explore the reach of curation as both metaphor and practice.

- a) Curate (v) (current usage): “To act as curator of (a museum, exhibits, etc.); to look after and preserve”; “to select the performers or performances to be included in (a festival, album, programme, etc); (also) to select, organize, and present (content), as on a website.”
- b) Curator (n): (1600s-1800s): “A person who has charge; a manager, overseer, steward”; “a keeper, custodian.”
- c) Curatour (n) (1450s-late 1800s): “tutor”; “a person appointed as guardian of the affairs of someone legally unfit to conduct them him- or herself”; “one who has the care or charge of a person or thing.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

As the first definition suggests, we often understand curators as stewards and managers of collections; *to curate* (v) most often indicates a commitment to look after and preserve, a definition which continues to evolve as web-based knowledge stores are collected and organized. This straightforward application might characterize the impulse of many scholars and writers who feel called to work with underrepresented people. To curate is to care for collected stories and find ways to make their public value known. For literacy workers in jails and prisons, the will “to look after and preserve” emerges from myriad sources—a desire to share a love for writing, a commitment to social justice and prison reform, or a need to participate in civic engagement beyond one’s comfort zone. It might be the will to “preserve” the voices of underrepresented people or a more overt political desire to intervene in systemic oppression through increasing access to education. While noble in its ambition, this kind of curation risks fixing rather than freeing space for writers in jail to shift social perceptions and move toward social justice. Remixing modern “curate” verbiage with the historical usages offers a more complex and useful set of applications.

Older versions of the term complicate stewardship by creating a direct connection between education, care, and need with implications that are difficult to ignore in a carceral context. We might drop the custodial implication by embracing collective ownership since writing workshops surely embody the opportunity for a group of writers to become shared guardians of each other, to become guardians of an emerging body of stories. This moves beyond mere recognition and preservation into the deeper work of collaborative learning and listening. Although the connection between tutor and curator is easily made for writing teachers committed to rhetorical writing processes and critical pedagogy, curating also can move toward the work of sharing space for incarcerated writers to lead workshops. In Spring 2016, for example, a small group of writers at the jail successfully proposed a poetry slam between two men’s writing groups; their enthusiasm and drive encouraged the writers, facilitators,

and jail staff to support this literacy celebration as a productive and energizing sanctioned event.

Curating carceral literacy work also requires attention to volunteer/student training in ways that might be less visible in conventional community-university relationships, though I would argue that they are always present, if not acknowledged. Since 2005, dozens of volunteers from campus and the community have moved through the SpeakOut! workshops. Some offer one semester of their time to one workshop; others have been with the program for several years and have worked with both our youth and adult writers. Whether volunteer facilitators are short-term or commit more time, training and support beyond the initial program orientation are central to curating a community with stable practices, if not infrastructure. The rigid context often requires facilitators to flex creative pedagogical muscles as they design and manage the weekly sessions. Our database of past lesson plans, writing activities, and literacy-based research provides practical and theoretical resources. A monthly volunteer newsletter highlights successes and challenges, and connects volunteers to one another. Facilitation teams of three or four volunteers support each other by planning and debriefing each week. While these are, in fact, some examples of engagement that have emerged over time, they do little to address the very real affective needs of volunteers who write with confined and often traumatized participants. As Eli Goldblatt and David Jolliffe argue in their essay, “The Unintended Consequences of Sponsors,” “sponsors can be harmed, altered, or even transformed by the population and pedagogy they contract to teach” (127). Access to the materials and ongoing conversation about theories of writing and community outreach might buoy interns and volunteer sponsors, but meaningful and deliberate attention to self-care practices is also necessary. As I have argued elsewhere, we have a responsibility to offer both writers and workshop facilitators concrete self-care tools, e.g. structured writes, anonymity, space for talk, as they accumulate experiences with difficult narratives (Jacobi and Roberts). That said, training resources and tools cannot control the moving walls of carceral policy that make it difficult to anticipate how harm and/or transformation might emerge.

A curatorial approach provides a method for thinking through institutional infrastructures, sustainability, and public investment—and effective story-making. In the necessarily unstable world of community writing, stories continue to emerge through careful and intentional curation even when programmatic and community-university partnerships are unable to find footing in conventional models of infrastructure, e.g., ongoing programming, consistent staffing, geographic and material security. Curating stories through intentional teaching, Jeanette Neden argues, can challenge the binaries that box people into fixed categories and histories (224-5). The administrators and workshop facilitators of SpeakOut! can create the conditions under which some writers will find voice through participation in process and publication.⁵ They can curate the space and time that will cultivate stories that might otherwise remain silent. This is not to invoke an overdetermined promise of

empowerment; rather, curation suggests a commitment to a kind of elastic reciprocity that infrastructure by nature sometimes fixes too rigidly.

In *Unsustainable: Re-imagining Community Literacy, Public Writing, Service-Learning, and the University*, editors Jessica Restaino and Laurie JC Cella argue that traditional models for building engaged university-community infrastructure seldom fit into tidy development and growth plans. As several authors in this edited collection suggest, teachers/scholars/researchers often turn to tactical and creative visions for program viability since it is not always possible to garner or sustain the kinds of institutional supports that strategic infrastructure building demands. As established scholars in community literacy have long argued (e.g., Mathieu, Goldblatt, Parks, Rousculp), ethical and reciprocal listening, or what Laurie Cella calls “responsive flexibility” (8), suggests that we dissolve rigid barriers between tactical and strategic action. In doing so we make space for inevitable calls for change in our community literacy work without collapsing into failure narratives. The need for such reflexivity and flexibility is almost a mandate for literacy work behind bars since last minute cancellations/lockdowns and the drama of making hairpin turns when an event or program goes awry are all too familiar. Rather than relying upon traditional models for engaged university-community infrastructure in such contexts, I suggest a turn to a participatory curatorial model, one that explores the notion of curating a program within an ever-shifting set of artists, regulations, allegiances, and expectations.

Making Space for a Participatory, Curatorial Model for Engagement

“...the role of the curator is to create free space, not occupy existing space.” (*Ways of Curating*, Hans Ulrich Obrist, 154)

While Obrist offers curation as a liberatory narrative, the act of designing programming that resists alignment with one institutional infrastructure or another might make space for multiple curators, a participatory curation. We might, in fact, share the work of curating discourse with every writer. Perhaps this is a bit of democratic idealism, but bell hooks reminds us that “true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (*Talking Back* 8). To curate community-based literacy programming in the twenty-first century is to resist mere collection by working to rethink/remix/reuse the spaces we already occupy, with social change as a guiding principle. Obrist argues that “the curator has to bridge gaps and build bridges between artists, the public, institutions and other types of communities by connecting different people and practices, and creating the conditions for triggering sparks between them” (154). The work of freeing space and bridging institutional, ideological, and ethical challenges in order for sparks to fly is familiar terrain for those of us committed to community and

public literacy work. The people we work with are ready bridge-builders; we curate opportunities for these structures to be made, demolished, cracked, renewed, even used. Ann Folwell Stanford reflects similarly upon her work with women writing in Chicago's Cook County Jail: "writing becomes a nexus of bridges: to the self, to family, lovers, and friends, to each other, and to the community of readers who have no idea who the writers are but who may—just may—be changed a bit through reading their words. These bridges are a means of survival, a means of creating the space for home, for belonging, ownership, nurture, even for getting at the heart or root of things" ("Where Love Flies Free").

Ten years of program evaluations offer anecdotal evidence that SpeakOut! participants also consider their writing to do the work of bridging between salient parts of their past, current, and imagined lives. This notion of bridging offers a way to think about how writing might curate change; we've attempted this in a few ways within the SpeakOut! program:

- *Building (strategic) support networks:* We have become an active studio for observation for potential donors who almost always support our work after meeting the writers and participating in a writing session. This might seem obvious to those who run non-profit organizations, but for academics who are largely engaged in research or the work of program development and teaching, fundraising through a campus development office is often a skill that we are not trained to exercise. As Paula Mathieu and Diana George remind us, people in different positions of privilege are able to access and promote different networks of curation; rather than vilifying these disparities—and there are many—they argue we might establish support "through networks of relationships, in alliances between those in power and those without, through moments of serendipity" (144). Our donors may help us strategically build connections with like-minded local businesses and corporations, our current writers help us to tell the story of literacy programming in compelling ways, and our alums—both facilitators and writers—aid in assessment and outreach as we model flexible ways to work toward social change within institutions that are monumentally slow to shift.

- *Cultivating short-term relationships with tactical partners:* In addition to the regular SpeakOut! sessions, over the past two years writers at the jail have participated in a writing exchange exercise with students enrolled in a rhetoric and civility university course. I begin with a visit to the campus classroom to share stories about writing behind bars and then coordinate two written exchanges between writers across contexts, both of whom complete the same writing exercises and then respond anonymously to each other. This exchange not only aims to shatter the university students' stated dark assumptions about incarcerated people, it also offers incarcerated writers an opportunity to engage in intellectual exchange, a dialogue that many deeply desire. A partnership with a community letterpress also allowed confined youth to learn about the history of the print industry and collaborate and print two poems as broadsides. Other tactical relationships might include written exchanges between the youth and

adult SpeakOut! workshops, replicating the exchange that Dr. Ann Folwell Stanford facilitated between women at Chicago's Cook County Jail and a local youth detention center ("Words Across Borders"). Curating short-term projects and relationships alleviates the expectations that the sponsors of institutional infrastructure sometimes assume. Among the benefits are the opportunity to reach new audiences with counternarratives of carceral identity and the option to extend the relationship if all involved are amenable.

• *Incubating activism:* Work with SpeakOut! groups regularly inspires student interns to create research projects that extend beyond the immediate workshops. In 2015, a SpeakOut! intern won the top undergraduate service-learning prize for her research and poster presentation on literacy programs for survivors of human trafficking. Another adapted our SpeakOut! model for use with a juvenile institution in her home state after earning her MA. In 2016 we hope to go further, shattering the byline expectations of most scholarly collections, by publishing a project co-authored not just with students, but with three women at the jail. We aim to write "with," not as essays/research projects often proclaim in an effort to acknowledge how a researcher has written up the story of her findings, but rather in the fullest sense of shared process, decision-making, and knowledge production. We'll tackle the challenge of representing mothering and addiction from jail as honestly and lyrically as we can by convening with open notebooks and ready pens for a chain of Friday mornings this spring. These examples highlight the ways that short-term commitments can incubate activist actions that will extend far beyond the time and space of our weekly workshop, work that perhaps, as Paul Feigenbaum argues, earns activism through "proto-collaborative imagination" (182). This is particularly salient when working with institutional partners driven by and held to different aims—and even values—and makes all the more important the possibility of flexible curation.

These practices exemplify the ways that curating community literacy behind bars can shift not only an individual writer's sense of self and worth, but might also activate wider audiences capable of affecting change to incarceration and justice to rethink what currently confined people might contribute to a robust citizenry. In a 2014 lecture, prison abolitionist Angela Davis points us to the big picture: "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time." Davis' words often inspire educators committed to work behind bars to remain steadfast despite the social and institutional barriers. Curation offers community literacy activists an approach to radically transform the ways we think about and relate to the millions of people locked up in the United States and around the world.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used here.

2. I began thinking through the application of curating to community literacy after designing and curating pop-up museums with Ed Lessor, Laura Rogers, and the Prison Public Memory team in Summer 2015 and attending Jonathan Carlyon's teaching talk on curating the classroom in November 2015. I am indebted to these events and colleagues for sharing their thinking on the work of curation.

3. For more detail about our program, please visit our website: <https://speakoutcl.wordpress.com/> (for information on SpeakOut!, access to the journal archive, and samples of writers' work) or <https://csucl.wordpress.com/> (for details on support for interns and volunteers)

4. I invoke this concept as used by scholars such as Shannon Carter, Deborah Mutnick, and Steve Parks in recent workshops and conference gatherings.

5. See similar claims in scholarship by Coogan, Hartnett, Jacobi and Stanford, and Sweeney.

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Tobi Jacobi is Professor of English at Colorado State University where she teaches courses on writing and literacy theory with a specialization in the work of incarcerated women writers. She directs the CSU Community Literacy Center and trains student and community volunteers to facilitate writing workshops with incarcerated adults and at-risk youth in Northern Colorado, a program that has been publishing and circulating writings from confined populations for 10 years. She has published on community literacy and prison writing in book collections and journals such as *Community Literacy Journal*, *Corrections Today*, *Feminist Formations* and *the Journal of Correctional Education*. Her edited collection (with Dr. Ann Folwell Stanford), *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out*, was published in 2014. Her current research (with Dr. Laura Rogers) focuses on examining narratives of representation from a girls' training school in Hudson, NY in the 1920s and 1930s.