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## Lifting the Lid: How Prison Writing Workshops Shed Light on the Social Shadow

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## Lifting the Lid: How Prison Writing Workshops Shed Light on the Social Shadow

*Erec Toso*

### Abstract

While the social, political, economic, educational, and cultural consequences of high rates of incarceration have been well documented, the social psychological dynamics have not received as much discussion. I offer here a first person narrative reflection on the connections between a writing workshops and raising social awareness of the realities of day-to-day lives of inmates. Appropriate writing pedagogy, personal challenges to meeting to the workshops, and the need to publish inmate stories inform the essay.

When I point my old Subaru south, the familiar butterflies take wing. I drive toward the tracks, the coal-fired power plant, and the state prison, where I will meet the writing workshops. About the time I merge onto the interstate, I get nervous. The reasons are both trivial and close to a live nerve.

I am nervous that I will not do a good job running the workshops. That's the teacher in me, and my apprehension is well founded. The workshops have been going on for almost forty years, and they have a decorated, high-profile history. There is no way I can live up to what Richard Shelton has done with inmate writing—National Book Awards, Endowment for the Humanities grants, and on and on. But I am a teacher and writer and pay attention to the challenges in front of me, which loom large as I approach the Arizona State Prison Complex at the end of Wilmot road.

The "population" of workshop members is a Rubik's Cube of ethnic diversity, previous education, expectations, and attitudes toward writing. It's a challenge not unlike a tough English 101 class, but the racial divides and prison politics, the "shot-callers" and gang affiliations are all there, waiting at the door when the workshop is over, hanging over the yard like a poison cloud. I am not totally naïve about the realities of inmate life, especially in the higher security yards, yet even this is not the core source of my agitation.

I am concerned that I have not sufficiently prepared, that I have forgotten to type or make copies of inmate work, that I am not up to the job of providing what these men need to improve their writing. I feel some of the same butterflies on

the first day of college writing classes for similar reasons. All teaching situations require customized planning, whether teaching upper-division nonfiction prose classes, first-year developmental writing, or prison creative writing workshops. I do not get nervous because I will soon be sitting in a room with twenty inmates in a medium-high security unit of the Arizona State Prison Complex, nor because of the sometimes rigid and byzantine bureaucracy that seems to be forever changing the rules. No, the nervousness comes from a fear that I will have to meet some of my own demons, that I will shrink from the harsh facts of inmate stories, that I will fail to help the men to tell their stories in a way that readers will find compelling enough to see the human face behind the words.

Yes, there is more going on here. Prison is more than a place of confined bodies; it is also, literally and metaphorically, the place of confined, broken, disowned, and silenced stories. It is no secret that the US has the highest documented rates of incarceration in the world, and Arizona ranks sixth among the states at 572 in prison per 100,000 residents. Much has been written about the social, political, and economic costs of incarceration, but the social psychology of American incarceration hasn't received much attention. There is more even than a kind DSM catalogue of mental illness and how prisons have become the holding bin for the mentally ill who have no advocates or resources. There is even a more subtle, more insidious, dynamic at work.

Prison reflects what Carl Jung calls the shadow, that aspect of the psyche to reject and disown the unpleasant aspects of a whole human. Unpleasant traits like addictions, poverty, mental illness, violence, racism, ignorance—the whole package—ends up locked away. What is “human” includes as much atrocity as it does fine art, after all. Jung contends that denying the shadow comes at a great cost, that vitality decreases in proportion to the energy needed to keep the shadow at bay. It is worth noting that he does not argue for acting out the “Mr. Hyde,” aspects of the psyche, but that full autonomy results only from being aware of what is in the shadow, how it shows up in fits of anger, sadness, depression, even psychosis. He argues the “enlightenment does not come imagining figures of light, but my making the darkness conscious” (Jung). He also says that how the mind organizes itself manifests in social organization and behavior. What goes on inside, in other words, takes a parallel form outside, in social structure, institutions, organization.

One might ask, “How does darkness become conscious?” Good question that. The best way I know is through story. The disowned elements of the psyche rise to consciousness in dreams and story. Stories have a way of defusing some of the tension of repression, freeing that energy for creative work. Making art is another way to touch the shadow. Inviting inmates to create and—in the process—to access some of that shadow, is one way to make their presence conscious to the psyche of the free world, the un-incarcerated.

The inmates in our prisons are the exiled aspects of the social body, the rejects, the throwaways, the denied. Many of the men I work with in prison are there because they are the leftovers when opportunities ran dry. Society does not offer everyone

the same chances, the same educations, the same encouragement or preparation. The ones who are left out of the legal avenues to upward improvement have no choice but to make their own opportunities in underground systems, black markets, organized gangs, or criminal taking of resources.

If I am honest with myself, I know that I am no better than they are, and, quite possibly would have made the same choices given similar situations. Yes, there are dangerous men in prison, violent sociopaths who should be contained. But there are others, many others. Nonviolent drug offenders usually make it in the workshops. I know some who claimed they needed to feed a family, so played the only game open to them; they did what they had to do. Being a product, in some ways, of my environment and privilege, I know that I did not have to make some of the choices these men made. Going into the prison reminds me of those parts of myself that I have not had to feed to survive.

I have to consider the truth of stories I would rather not hear and that those stories serve as witness for those unpleasant facts that the free world would rather ignore. It is my place to raise the questions that will lead to more effective telling: forms and quality that will result in publication. In many ways, I am the bad news that stories will have to be rewritten if they will ever go beyond the privacy of a festering wound.

The butterflies settle as I pass through the six electric gates, three ID checkpoints, and the long walk across the open yard to the Programs Building. As the men enter the room and help to set up the desks and chairs, I find myself on more familiar ground, talking about language and ideas, the same topics I address in college writing classes. It is this point of contact, this negotiation, and how it differs between the prison and the university that I would like to explore. It's a good subject, and one that, as a teacher, I find challenging to think about.

When I first consider the differences in how I approach college classes compared to the prison workshops, I see more continuity than disconnect. In some ways, in other words, writing is writing, whether it be a freshman comp class at the university or a creative writing class in the prison. I am not surprised to eavesdrop on the men in the workshop at the door to our classroom arguing over the uses and abuses of profanity or whether explicit violence is necessary to develop a particular story. Inmates are often less jaded and more passionate about style and content than my undergraduate students, though both share the interest. All that said, the contexts and purposes of prison writing workshops and college writing courses are drastically distinct and require that I tailor methods and materials to fit the job.

The biggest difference between my university teaching and the prison workshops is what one could call the “social and political constructs” within which the writing happens. Angela Davis coined the term “prison industrial complex” as way to get a handle on the epidemic increase in incarceration along with the growth of private, for profit prisons (Davis).

Our prison population is the highest in the world, and part of what leads to incarceration is illiteracy. Learning to read and write makes it less likely that one will

end up in prison, or, in the case of already being there, makes it less likely that an inmate will return. The reasons for decreased recidivism and literacy are not fully understood, but the relationship has been documented, and parsing the particulars is beyond the scope of this essay.

As a teacher, I need to understand the context of the workshops. Inmates don't get credit, grades, or degrees for their writing. Inmates come to the workshops for a wide variety of reasons, sometimes just to get some paper and a pen. More often than not, they bring some kind of question, something about how to express feelings they cannot contain, or an inquiry about how to compose a letter to a judge. Sometimes they come for the wrong reasons and find better ones as time and writing progresses.

The prison population, like any other, is diverse and complex. J., for example, graduated from an Ivy League school before becoming a heroin addict, and C. dropped out of school in the eighth grade. Yet they see themselves represented stereotypically in television, film, and advertising as lowlifes, cruel, mentally deranged, stupid, comically inept. As a result, inmates have desensitized to criticism or gotten so thick skinned that they accept it with much of a struggle. Paradoxically, they tell me the workshops are a place where they can feel, be more human for a while.

Inmates write about a world I barely know—one of addiction, homelessness, violence, prostitution, as well as love, hope, and spiritual life. They patiently explain terms like “tweaker” and strategies to stretch food stamps, like buying a cheap item with the stamp and then taking the cash for what they really want. They have few illusions about clichés like a fair, blind justice system and are jaded about equal enforcement of laws. Unlike students at the university, I do not have to persuade inmates that poverty, race, and class all figure in to opportunities offered.

Consider the work of J., an addict, a self-identified ex-member of the Aryan Brotherhood, and one of the more serious members of the workshop:

### *Heroin Cosmology*

A flame flickers  
Beneath the flimsy white plastic spork  
But it does not melt  
Into an unrecognizable blob.  
Instead, thousands of tiny new planets  
Sizzle into existence, pop into extinction  
A fresh galaxy of euphoria.  
The clear plastic mosquito slurps its fill  
And the newest god winces  
As the needle-sharp silvery fang punctures.  
He begins to pray to Him  
To see crimson swirling and congealing

Mixing with dark nirvana, however temporary  
It is evidence of true aim.  
As the smooth black rubber o-ring rams home  
And the white circle of string  
Is untied from above a bicep  
Eyelids droop, jaws slacken, mysteries are revealed,  
And A-H-H!  
The vice tightens  
Another turn  
The grip  
Like jaws of a leg-hold  
Trap.

J. grew up in Phoenix, lived on the streets after he dropped out of high school, and saw no hope of going to college. He was married for a while and has children. He is an Arizona son who is shrewd enough to see opportunities and take them.

The physical space of the workshops is decidedly low-tech: no ELMO, LCDs, connectivity, or even overhead projectors. The workshops operate in the age of pencil and paper. Regimentation, martial authority, and predatory relationships pervade the yard. All of this adds up to a “no bullshit” atmosphere. My persona has to be one that radiates confidence and commitment to what we are doing. I have to believe in it. I have to have reasons that the inmates understand and respect for what we do.

Writing in the workshops is intrinsically motivated. That is, I don't tell them what to write about. They choose the subjects, though I do give “assignments” for those who are stuck. For example, I might ask them to describe an idea or concept as a character, to personify an abstraction like despair. But I tell them that they have to do the assignment or something else that they want to work on. Most just work on what they want to write about. The work is usually what we composition people call “expressive” or creative—prose, poetry, and fiction, or some blend of them.

The inmates bring a rich well of experience to the workshops but not always the technical skills to present that experience in a way that most readers will find interesting or comprehensible. In order to polish the writing, inmates must work on language, rhetorical strategies, syntax, form. We talk about matching the subject to the form best at conveying it. It is heady, hard work. The “lessons” of “showing, not just telling,” using figurative language, selecting telling detail, and many others, are all woven into the context of drafting, revising, editing.

Another aspect that contributes to motivation lies in the end goal of the workshop: publication. The Poetry Project is supported by a grant from the Lannan Foundation that pays for a yearly magazine. For years it was the *Walking Rain Review* under Richard Shelton, but now it is *Rain Shadow*, part tribute, part description of the meteorology around the prison.

A literary journal speaks to a wider audience than most of the inmates write for. They write for each other, and the results are sometimes embarrassing in the

sophomoric and puerile humor, the sexism, the scatological hilarity. When I point to this, often the only voice that wants improvement, they tell me I would understand if I were incarcerated. I don't disagree and remind them that they aren't just writing for other inmates if they want their work published. In order to publish, they have to move beyond complaining or the easy slapstick and find an image or a telling detail or a story with breathing characters rather than general abstractions. These are the messengers that both speak from the shadow and to a reader. Energy is exchanged and art is born. This, to me, is when the writing becomes truly dangerous in making connections between the free world and that of the prison.

Here is a poem from B., a long-time member of the workshops who has published regularly for over ten years.

### *Cut From The Will*

Though you knew—  
I know you knew—  
I was already stuck outside  
In the rock garden's far end  
Atop a three-headed saguaro.

So, why?  
I never could make myself  
Eat a whole crow  
But didn't I always bring each  
Broken body to the backdoor?

I know you saw them.

I left them for you  
There on the limestone stair  
With its unshaped edge and map  
Of dried mildew islands.

I saved you,  
Saved you from your stone dream:  
Brought you black feathers  
Broken bits of wing and claw.  
I left them—always—so  
You could find them  
Where the afternoon shadows

From the backyard's single cottonwood  
Reach the door's sedimentary tread.  
Open up!  
You hear me,  
I know you hear me.  
Just open the damn door...  
I'm asking...

They can try to publish anywhere, and they bring in drafts to workshop for science fiction magazines, travel magazines, literary magazines, and contests like the Pen America Prison Writing Contest.

In other words, the workshops are a means to an end of reaching an audience and not an abstract audience, but one that might pay for the right to publish.

Given that the workshops have limited seats and participants that self-select, most of the inmates want to learn, desperately in cases. They do not carry an inheritance of entitlement, like many of the undergraduates at the UA, however. Many come from families that did not expect high levels of literary attainment. They were not told to go to college, become doctors, lead. Many of the inmates have been homeless or addicted, or have grown up in abject poverty or dropped out of school. In terms of writing, many have trouble with spelling and punctuation and are not afraid to ask basic questions about nouns, verbs, sentences, or whether or not it is better to begin with a detail or a broad overview. They lean in sometimes to ask what a word brought up in discussion means. They want to participate, learn, inquire. Sometimes the profundity of the questions, such as what is a sentence or what makes a paragraph, leave me scratching my head because I don't know for sure. I can't define the difference between poetry and prose other than by vague generalizations. They make me think about the fundamental functions of language, the role of a sentence as the smallest unit of story, character, and action. They push me to question ways we dramatize the unspeakable.

Given that the context, population, physical resources, and motivations of the prison workshops differ so dramatically from the college writing class, what can a teacher/writer do? How do I negotiate this difference?

The first move I make is to meet them where they are, wherever that is. Then it is time to listen to what it is they need and what the best ways are to offer that. Some inmates need critique, sometimes sharp critique. Others may need encouragement, recognition for exploring difficult subjects or experiences. Sometimes the best thing I can do is listen. Some of them just want to have their say, to speak their truth, share a hard-won realization. These intangibles may be the reward of the workshops. Inmates get no direct social promotion for the workshops, but they can glean some better understanding of themselves by working on creative pieces.

When inmates join the workshops, their writing is often overly sentimental and distressingly abstract. They write, understandably, to daughters, girlfriends, and mothers in language more appropriate to Hallmark cards than to literary publication.

Or it is confessional, sensational, and graphic but goes little further than rendering scenes in distressingly harsh detail. They begin by recording experience, to the point where there is only circumstantial detail, with little or no broader audience appeal or larger idea. The next level of writing—which begins with a deep engagement with the subject—begins to examine a theme or idea and is a big step and depends in part on levels of reading, education, awareness of a worldview or vision. The bigger ideas, the context, the overlap with an outside reader's world seem unnecessary or unworthy of consideration. The learning curve for these men is steep. Sometimes, in a matter of months, they write with greater maturity, precision, and honesty. They hear, in the other men's work, real effort to capture experience through well-chosen, independent, fresh, well-earned language.

They have to grow beyond embryonic ideas of what good writing is and how much work it takes to shape and share a complex thought. I realize that I am talking to myself when talking to them. I see that what needs to be said in my own life is the hard stuff—my fears, anger, and sense of injustice. It takes so much energy to keep that repressed, bottled up, confined. I have begun that process but have not finished. There is work to be done. It begins with invitation, leads to listening, and then progresses to the craft of shaping for oneself and for a reader. It is one thing to be heard, another to be understood.

When I reload the Subaru and head back toward the city, I remember that when I began to write, I found someone inside myself I did not previously know. The words led to ideas, strung together an identity, spoke taboos, and affirmed beliefs. The words took on a life of their own when put to paper. They made some of the darkness conscious. It is the words wrung from darkness that I trust when I go to the prison or to the classroom. With some respect, skill, and something to say, students and inmates might find a way to save us from ourselves.

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## Author Bio

Erec Toso teaches in the Writing Program at the University of Arizona. His first memoir, *Zero at the Bone – Rewriting Life After a Snakebite* was published in 2007. He has published essays in *The Sun – A Magazine of Ideas*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Northern Lights*, and has published book reviews in *Rhetoric Review*. He runs prison writing workshops at the Arizona State Prison, Tucson Complex.

## Challenging How English Is Done: Engaging the Ethical and the Human in a Community Literacies Seminar

*Susan Weinstein, Jeremy Cornelius, Shannon Kenny, Muriel Leung, Grace Shuyi Liew, Kieran Lyons, Alejandra Torres, Matthew Tougas, and Sarah Webb*

### Abstract

Eight English graduate students and a professor reflect on their semester-long exploration of community literacy studies. The students, some in a MFA Creative Writing program and some doing doctoral work in literature, rhetoric, or English Education, discuss how the community literacies lens unsettled their relationship to English Studies.

## Background

In 2008, Fero et al. published an article titled "A Reflection on Teaching and Learning in a Community Literacies Graduate course" in this journal about the experience of teaching and learning in a seminar on community literacy practices, designed for a new graduate concentration in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University (82). A second case study, "Community Engagement in a Graduate-Level Community Literacy Course", appeared in *CLJ* in 2014, and described a seminar designed for a graduate program in Rhetoric and Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University (Bowen et al. 18). Each of these texts offered a model for the community literacy seminar, while also pointing to the particular challenges involved in connecting university programs and graduate students to community spaces.

When I contacted *Community Literacy Journal* editor Michael Moore in the summer of 2015 to ask about ways of connecting my planned Fall 2015 community literacies seminar to the journal's work, his immediate suggestion was to build on the work of Fero et al. and Bowen et al. by contributing a third seminar case study. This article, then, represents the results of that study and expands the dialogue by centering a seminar *not* situated within a Rhetoric/Writing/Communications