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Assembling for Agency: Prisoners and College Students in a Life Writing Workshop

David Coogan

Rhetorical theorists have argued that agency is a communal experience, but material conditions in jail *and* society often prevent prisoners and college students from experiencing it in meaningful ways that embrace difference. Challenging those conditions by bringing both groups together in a writing workshop enables everyone to resist discourses that would name them and to inquire, collaboratively, about pressing social problems like gun violence. This essay shows how a prisoner and a college student sustained that inquiry in writing, moving from *metanoia* or regret into *kairos*—the seizing of their day and the experience of agency. The ultimate value of that experience transcends the here and now of the workshop to become the building block of a better public sphere.

In his book about the end of Chicago's high-rise public housing, *City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the Public Sphere in Metropolitan America*, David Fleming reveals an all-too-familiar disjuncture between Rhetoric's high ideals for democracy and its gritty translation into the real. It comes through the story of transforming one of these communities, Cabrini Green, into condos with shared public areas and a storytelling project for economically and racially diverse residents. Though the urban planners from the city did not characterize it this way, Fleming argues convincingly that a polis had been envisioned—a community that "literally sets aside time and space for the rendering and negotiation of conflicts"(13). Incredibly, the same public life that we theorize in our scholarship and commend to students in community literacy projects was at hand: not the shouting of pundits or the dead ends of polemics but the honorable efforts of ordinary people making claims, telling stories, presenting evidence, and presumably, compromising in service of something larger and nobler. Then Rhetoric became rhetoric again.

When the plan was made public, condo-buying "investors" were characterized in the press as the brave ones doing the right thing by integrating with the dangerous ones. Naturally, some from Cabrini resisted this characterization—their elbows in need of this middle-class rubbing—and came up with a counter plan: to buy their building from the city. This triggered a competition in public discourse between the rhetoric of *nobles oblige*, on the one hand, and *solidarity* amongst poor African Americans on the other, with impatient strains overheard in the background—a barely contained excitement to just blow up "the projects" already and all of the fears and loathing they

had come to represent. Of course, the buildings came down to make way for the mixed-income community minus the ambitious storytelling project. And when they did, the “real winners,” Fleming concludes, were the “white, child-less couples who scored cheap housing” (213) on prime city real estate while displaced residents got pushed farther and farther to the city borders, carrying with them only the Section 8 vouchers for apartments that most landlords were under no legal obligation to honor.

Though Fleming’s study does not feature himself or his students going public to argue the case for saving these buildings from the wrecking balls, what he does feature is the common challenge facing teachers, writers, and scholars with like-minded visions of promoting justice with their rhetoric while having to contend with forces much more powerful than rhetoric. And in that sense, it is instructive. We know from research in political science, he explains, that “the highest levels of political activity” often take “place in the most economically diverse places, apparently, because the conflict stimulated by heterogeneity increases civic participation among residents” (48). Yet homogenous neighborhoods in cities or suburbs, with their “isolation” and “functional segregation,” all but ensure there is “little to argue about” (48-9). A “fear of difference,” it would seem, has been built right into the environment. And in the case of land-use politics in Chicago, that built-in fear simply stomped the rosy ideals of urban planning. Substitute “community literacy” or “service learning” for urban planning, and you can see where I’m headed. We may want our rhetoric to make a difference. But difference might not want—or even notice—our rhetoric.

If this were only a problem in Chicago or even a problem specific to cities, Fleming’s trouble might well be his own—a sentimental streak about urban planning, perhaps, or the familiar pining for the polis in rhetorical theory. But the underlying challenge of making a polis filled with diverse stakeholders capable of sustaining critical dialogue about problems that affect the common good is not unique to cities or urban planning. It’s a challenge of reaching beyond our familiar “communities of the like-minded” (Fleming 14), a challenge that is as much practical as it is rhetorical.

For me, there is no greater reminder of that reaching than when I am walking single file in silence with my college students, the only baker’s dozen of both genders in street clothes, flush up against the wall in the hall of the Richmond City Jail, behind the yellow line, waiting for our guide to open a steel door; waiting again for prisoners in jump suits to clear an area before we get the cue to walk again, stop again. When we walk to this class that only meets at the jail, we realize we are far from our familiar community of like-minded students and professors who, if they share nothing else, share the freedom of wearing whatever they like and walking wherever they choose, unescorted and unguided by a yellow line. In this long hallway there is no fitting in. But once we enter the classroom we call our sanctuary and our incarcerated classmates, a few minutes later, join us, it becomes possible to find a meaningful, if momentary, fit.

Like the ancients who assembled in forums to enter into a realm of freedom with their words, we assemble here to persuade and to be persuaded, to identify and to question identifications, to open ourselves to the possibility of change in jail and in society. This is a hopeful practice, a ritual, even—coming together to write and share

what we have read. We write in search of freedom together. Yet we write with full awareness that even this freedom to write could be taken from us—that our assembly is a temporary privilege for pursuing common ground across the many boundaries that seem to divide us: e.g., race, class, gender, age, experiences with violence, drugs, crime, incarceration. Our assembly cannot change the facts of these divisions. Yet assembling does defy the determinism of existing material conditions in the jail and in our city by creating opportunities for everyone to resist discursive practices and group identities emanating from those conditions; making public collective concerns and regrets; dwelling in a collective *metanoia* of our lives; and discovering *kairos*—to seize the time in writing and sharing. Assembling for a life-writing workshop is not just a hopeful practice, then, but a rhetorical one that promotes the experience of agency and the exercise of citizenship as active, collaborative phenomena—words and deeds that would not occur outside assembly.

My collaborator and friend, John Dooley, a poet and GED teacher with over thirty years of experience at the jail, and the person making this writing workshop—this assembly—possible, puts it better:

The very process of writing and sharing as we do in our classes invites us, sometimes as a soft song, sometimes as a siren, sometimes as a rip – current, to draw nearer and nearer to the rivers of inspiration that give expression to those near, near me. Our writings and our sharings give expression to all that we are. Our expressions reach far down in to our darkest moments and places, whisper like the sea our mysterious languages of our unique truths, and, with our sacred permissions, reveal our tenderness and joys and our consciousness and our aloneness and the very underlying opposites which permeate our very existence. Through our writings and sharings, through compassionate listenings, we are able to integrate each other’s sorrows and joys and horrors and humor and contradictions. Thereby, with written and spoken permissions, we are able to enter vast, deep, personal spiritual passageways to the very essence of who we are and how we feel and how we see the world. Our writings and our sharings are our sanctuaries, places wherein and wherefrom we may remember who we are as human beings, living souls.

I do appreciate having a poet—*this* poet—lead my students and me to class. It helps that he’s huge, tall, and tattooed, speaks in a low baritone, jokes, and gets enormous respect from the men he brings to school and has no problem, none whatsoever, kicking them out of school for breaking his rules, which amount to common sense and decency: no negativity, no slacking, no “N” word or denigrating talk about women—just cheerful study, honest and open. All of that helps, but what really helps is that he understands that a diverse group like ours writing about our lives will stumble into “the very underlying opposites which permeate our very existence.” The right response is patience and humility, to try holding those opposites in our hands without breaking them, integrating each other’s “sorrows and joys and horrors and humor and

contradictions.” When we do it is because we have tapped into what Carolyn Miller calls the “kinetic energy of rhetorical performance”:

The Greek root of energy is *ergon*, deed or work, and *energeia* is the deed in the doing, action itself. If agency is a potential energy, it will be thought of as a possession or property of an agent (like a stationary stone), but if agency is a kinetic energy, it must be a property of the rhetorical event or performance itself. (147)

Of course, kinetic energy does not just circulate because we convene a class. Just the same we should not underestimate the difficulty of convening a class and its protean power. As Karlyn Campbell reminds us, agency is “communal, social, cooperative, and participatory and, simultaneously, constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture” (3).

There’s only so much agency prisoners at this jail, the Richmond City Jail, can constitute when they are constrained on their open and overcrowded tiers by the “context and culture” of fellow prisoners talking crime, running games on each other, or in other ways spinning their wheels with nothing to do and too many people to do it with. Just the same, there’s only so much agency college students can constitute when they are constrained by the “material and symbolic” borders of our urban campus, where talk about crime and prison can either be concrete—the student who got robbed last month—or abstract—a pendulum of political positions, a constellation of pop culture references. It may seem strange to say it like this, but prisoners and free citizens need each other to cultivate agency in ways that resist their shared restriction within these “material and symbolic” boundaries. What they need is that opportunity to find in each other the agency they crave. Yet “if agency is an attribution,” writes Miller:

Our ideological concerns have been misplaced. We should be concerned less about empowering subaltern subjects and more about enabling and encouraging attributions of agency to them by those with whom they interact—and accepting such attributions from them. We should examine the attributions we ourselves are willing to make and work to improve the attributions that (other) empowered groups are willing to make. (153)

That is what it means to cultivate agency: to consider which attributions we are “willing to make” and willing to help others make. It is not the case, in other words, that college students, by virtue of their status as students, their literacy, and so on, are the ones “giving” agency to the less empowered and less literate, but that both work to find moments in which they can attribute agency to the other—to interrupt what Patricia Roberts-Miller characterizes as the “security” of ingroup/outgroup thinking (180) and the “naïve realism” and “essentialism” it requires—an essentialism we are more likely to hold close when we are secure in the communities we know best. Assembling across difference to experience a new kind of agency is enormously useful and sadly unusual

for people who more often experience rhetoric in the community or even in college as the *reinforcement* of preconceived ideas and *affirmation* of group identities.

To illustrate these claims, I offer a rhetorical analysis of two students’ attempts to resist group identities as “violent” or as the “victim of violence”—two students whose writings together carve out a more complicated alternative to those characterizations and storylines in public discourse. Their writings emerged from a service-learning course, Writing and Social Change, which has the following objectives:

- To evaluate your life experiences and values, writing out a vision of where you’ve been and where you’re going in life in response to a range of readings in poetry, fiction and non-fiction
- To share those writings with your classmates in spirit of mutual respect and inquiry, developing a theme out of that inquiry and conducting research to answer your questions whenever necessary
- To revise your writing—refine your inquiry—based, in part, on the feedback you get
- To create a portfolio of polished pieces or one single piece—20 pages of it, typed, double-spaced
- To articulate a theme or a set of themes running throughout that body of work in a cover letter (Coogan 1)

What I am looking at now are the final portfolios of Isreal and Jesse: 25 to 30 pages of poems, essays, flash autobiographies, and reflections drafted in class in response to prompts and revised out of class. The prompts asked them to write about a place they know well and to write about a time they experienced violence in some way (as perpetrator, victim, by-stander, etc.). Some of these writings also appeared in our class anthology, which was made public to the Sheriff’s staff and guests from VCU at a reading. Even so, I asked each man if I could quote from his portfolio in this essay, and each agreed. Both also signed release forms with the Sheriff’s office and with VCU, giving us formal permission to make their work public.

As you can see from the first course objective, a large part of what we do is write to evaluate our histories so that we can better determine our futures. In my course description, I elaborate on the task as a “communal writing practice” where we:

bear witness to the problems we see in our lives and in life. We will share our diverse experiences and together envision a world we can share that is more humane, more accommodating, more generous and sane; a world where there is less derailing, less crime and less pain. To do this, we will need to wrestle with the paradox at the heart of writing and social change; the burden of becoming a writer—becoming honest, creative and responsible with words and, presumably, the corresponding deeds—while struggling with the forces in jail and “out there” in society that would subvert our courageous choices. (Coogan 1)

In this way, the workshop asks writers to stare directly into their own choices in order to open themselves to a range of emotions, including regret. In a recent essay about metanoia, the neglected underbelly of kairos—the opportune moment—Kelly Myers has shown that this plumbing of the depths of regret or guilt can be considered a form of rhetorical invention. In ancient art, Kairos is the athletic one shown running, hair flying, triumphant. He’s just made the right argument at the right time. Metanoia sits in the background with her melancholy. She’s lost the chance to speak up. The implication is that unless you like being sad, you don’t want to end up like Metanoia. Yet if we see metanoia as a necessary opportunity to reflect on a lost opportunity, it can be transformative. Metanoia enables the rhetor to synthesize the emotional, rational, and even spiritual dimensions of an experience that can lead him or her back to kairos and the exhilarating experience of agency.

Meyers goes on to note that in ancient texts about metanoia and kairos, there is often a “trusted teacher” enabling this growth. The lifewriting theorists, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, describe a similar role of “coaxer”—someone who helps another tell their story (68). What I want to argue for below, then, is the *social* experience of metanoia, the seizing of *our* day and days to come. By resisting the material conditions that make some stories, some storytellers, unknowable we are insisting that those stories and storytellers matter. Sharing these stories is not only valuable during the here and now of our workshop but in the larger work of the public sphere that we will take up as citizens after the workshop ends. We are building the kind of public sphere that we hope we will have an opportunity to build again.

The first hint we get that we will enter into a state of metanoia in Isreal’s poem is the title, “If I Had My Life to Live over Again.” While growing up, he explains, “I learned lessons through strangers, family and peers. Some were better and others for the worse. It is up to me to separate the gift from the curse.” Before he even tells us the story we are made aware that if mistakes get made, he is to blame.

I am isolating one moment which I can clearly see, with someone’s life on the line. I am talking about me. A couple of big bags of smoke got me in a bind. He was still arguing when bullets started flying. No one was hit and I thought it was over. No need I thought to be looking over my shoulder.

But of course there was. “Time past,” and the guy came back to shoot him in the leg: “I find myself facedown burning out of control. Is that shock or did my body separate from my soul? I’m being pulled but I feel no pain and I’m thinking ‘If only I had my life to live over again.’” Bleeding in the street and wondering about his soul, however, quickly gives way to wanting revenge: “Just that fast I go from wanting to do better in life to thinking the worse. I want that pussy motherfucka in a hearse.” After he heals and gets out of the hospital, he gets his chance:

I race to the scene and pour out fire. Burned up his face like rubber off a tire. Put him in a trunk and took off across the water, saw my car on the news—shit

is really out of order. So I dump his ass and slide, go and hide my ride. Police all through the hood this shit ain’t good. After a few weeks they get a tip and bring me in. Long story short I’m found guilty and sent to the pen. Left with the thought ‘If I only had my life to live over again.’

Though the poem is mostly plotting a street drama, I’m struck by the swinging from regret to revenge—going “from wanting to do better to thinking the worse” and then, finally, wishing he could have “life to live over again.” The problem is that we don’t know what he regrets. Does he regret taking revenge because he almost killed someone or almost died? Because he shot at someone or got shot? We don’t know and possibly he doesn’t, at least not in this poem.

Jesse’s first piece ends in much the same incomplete way. He poses the emotional problem that violence has created in his life while he struggles to resolve it. The story begins when he explains what happened when he “fell asleep watching television” at his house in another neighborhood closer to campus, a working-class area called Parkwood:

I woke up in what seemed like a dream to five or six handgun shots on the street outside my house. For a few seconds I floundered between the couch and the carpet. About the time I got to my feet I heard a car crash where the gun shots had come from. I didn’t really think it through before I ran outside.

While he is memorizing the plates, he hears more shots and runs back inside to warn his brother and call the police. A flurry of miscommunication between him and the dispatcher and the officer on the scene, however, leads Jesse to conclude: “Whoever shot up my neighborhood and crashed into my neighbor’s truck got out and away without much trouble.” This in turn leads him to wonder about the trouble he had put himself into “trying to get the license plates” and “being a good neighbor.” There is a cost—a new burden to carry now—and in some ways he regrets it.

I bought a police-style telescoping baton soon after and started carrying it all the time. I guess I just balanced my distrust with a bit of protection and I feel better. The feeling, the “better feeling, is not a satisfying one. I walk around standing taller, glancing over my shoulder with authority. It’s exhausting to be so concerned and aware of safety all the time. It will be a welcome change to walk confidently and happily without the aid of a solid steel bludgeon or a gun.

I find it disconcerting—this image of Jesse exhausted “standing taller, glancing over” his shoulder. I am equally disconcerted by the image of Isreal “pouring out fire” on a rival and stuffing him in the trunk of his car to settle a beef about “a couple of big bags of smoke.” It’s more than disconcerting, actually. My emotional range starts somewhere in fear, sinks into despair, and then plummets towards disgust. But neither guy lets me

keep these moods. “I chose my house,” Jesse writes in his next piece, and “to an extent my neighborhood, to an even broader extent my neighbors.” But these were

Naïve choices. How blinded and/or ignorant must a person be in order for a choice to no longer be a choice? How naïve can a choice be and still be a choice? I visited my neighborhood a few times before homeownership. There were no shoot-outs, my car was not stolen during my investigative moments. This seems good, I see no reason why I shouldn’t buy into this.

He clearly sees in retrospect that he had no basis for truly judging the neighborhood safe or unsafe and wonders aloud how much control any of us have over such choices. That second question, especially, seems wise—he wants to know just when choice becomes an illusion. But instead of dwelling further in his own regret, he extends himself into the minds of his classmates at the jail:

Inmate X was raised with expectation and desire for unrealistic and unnecessary things. Inmate X without his acknowledgement, was corralled into prison prerequisites. Inmate X was not warned by trusted individuals, he was taught by his friends and parents. Inmate X tested the waters and found them pleasantly luke-warm. Inmate X chose to steal from a person who had more than enough. Inmate X chose to sell drugs that were sold to him for the first time only hours previous. Inmate X chose his cell next to his neighboring inmates who chose their cells and chose their jails. Who understands their choices? Who knows their options? Hindsight is still far from 20/20.

I am compelled by Jesse’s reasoning here and his empathy about the process of social conditioning. Yet I am compelled, as well, by Isreal’s counterargument. In his next piece, “Life as a Falcon,” Isreal circles around Jesse’s paradox—what I’ll call the choice of no choice: “Girls or beefs, school or the streets, hustling or study hall, these shouldn’t be hard decisions to make at all.” Yet they were.

The choices I made are obvious to me. I’ve lost myself out in the streets. Hustling, clowning, trying to be down. I’ve put more than few of my good friends in the ground. Now I’m in search for a piece of mind and I can’t find it. Can’t seem to get out of this fog from so many days of getting blinded. But that was my choice. I lost my DAMN MIND!

Why did he choose that life in the streets? In “The Turn Around,” he explains that it was more or less a continuation of his earliest memories. As a little kid, he learned early on how to manipulate his mother, hustle the other kids out of their candy, talk his way out of beatings from his father, impress the older thuggish boys in the neighborhood, and organize kids to steal. This piece is written differently, too—with less swagger and rhyme. As he gropes for understanding, he compares his life to the Biblical character,

Israel. Though he spells his name differently from that character, Isreal sees himself like Israel, who was once known as Jacob before God called him to lead his people and form the nation of Israel. Before becoming Israel, Jacob was known as the deceiver or supplanter who fought his brother Esau in the womb and later tricked him out of his birthright with their dying father. In “The Turn Around,” Isreal recounts his own early days as a young manipulator, thief, and drug dealer in the neighborhood, concluding:

That was the Jacob in me while I was wrestling with God. Now I am on a newer path after God has touched my hip and made it hard for me to walk down that old path anymore. I’m grateful to have Him spare me and allow me to walk with Him. It could have been worse and I probably should be dead.

But when he tries following up on this “newer path” in his next piece, “Some Things Never Change,” we are forced to acknowledge another paradox: trying to change in an environment that rewards you for not changing. This could very well be jail, but this piece is actually set in an imagined future after he is released from jail. In the piece, he reports on a conversation he had with an old associate about a program he has created for at-risk kids. His antagonist in the poem only knows Isreal by his Jacob-like street name, Fresh.

Seriously Fres—I mean Isreal you know I get money but I’m just coming home.

If you really are serious, I can put you on without putting your life on the line.

You mean you’re gonna put me in charge of some heavy shit? I’m gone shine out this BITCH!

Cuz you are not paying attention at all and what you’re talking about ain’t gone happen dawg.

Yeah right, coke or dope—what’s the name of the game?

I’m working hard with the kids in this program I started, trying to provide them with a better chance at success.

You cold blooded boy. You got kids pumping that shit too?

Dawg what the fuck is wrong with you? Do you hear what’s coming out of my mouth?

The antagonist continues to not get it. And when he sort of gets it at the end, he quickly dismisses it because what Isreal is asking him to do as a mentor for young people sounds too much “like work.” What this guy wants is “the party with the good weed and bad broads.” Isreal sighs and shakes his head, realizing he can’t help this guy “live another way” and concluding that “some things never change.” Remarkably, Jesse confronts the same double bind in his last piece. In “Over the course of the semester,” he writes:

I have thought multiple times about the men in the jail classroom while I walk through my neighborhood watching my back. I’m not thinking about

those men in fear. I'm thinking about them in perplexity. I have befriended the men in the jail classroom. If I saw them today, whether on the street or in the jail, I would greet them warmly. I have yet to meet the men who live in my neighborhood and watch me greedily as I walk alone at night. I have heard their threats. I've responded by carrying a weapon. I can't help wondering: if we were in a writing group, think we could be friends? I know not every man is the same. I know that it takes a special person to accomplish what the men in the jail classroom have accomplished. I struggle with the fact that it took the attention of John, Dr. Coogan, and my other VCU students to set the process in action. I struggle only because the men in my neighborhood will not receive that sort of attention until they get locked up, maybe not even then.

What Jesse and Isreal both achieve here is that transformation of metanoia into kairos—reflection into action. Isreal's struggle to persuade his antagonist to join him as a community leader parallels Jesse's struggle to speak up to his menacing neighbors. Both identify the core challenge they'll face in the days to come. And both resist the lure of hero and victim stories, as Loraine Higgins and Lisa Brush characterize it in their study of welfare women writing: those ready-made narratives circulating all too easily, in this case, of having once been a victim of a violent environment and now becoming the hero who has easily, unambiguously risen above it as a persuasive community leader (Isreal) or an armed citizen protecting his turf (Jesse). Both know they are neither the heroes nor the victims of their stories but somewhere in between. They know what it is they don't know—an important disposition—as Myers elaborates, because it keeps the process of inquiry going:

When people identify the roots of 'passionate commitments'—specific moments of conversion to belief, both their own and those of others—they create improved hope for more productive conversation. Therefore, kairos and metanoia can come into argument not only as an end goal (e.g., transforming another's opinion) but as an important part of the process that shifts conversation away from antagonism and toward dialogue. (16)

Though they remain ambivalent—unsure, unsatisfied—they remain open to dialogue, oriented toward change, and eager to build a more peaceful public life.

We have reason to be hopeful about the long-term impact of engaging one another as citizens in diverse public spheres like the one described here, especially because of the ever-evolving nature of public spheres. As Robert Asen notes:

The value of greater participation lies not in its quantitative but its qualitative contributions. More voices bolster public agendas because they raise distinct perspectives and encourage different ways of participating. New nodes link up with existing nodes to create new pathways in the networks of the

public sphere. Engagement occurs amid points in existing networks, which themselves are always incomplete. (199)

None of us knows which networks we will find ourselves in the future. What is certain is that these networks need tending. Robert Waxler, a professor of English and the founder of Changing Lives through Literature, an alternative sentencing program, explains:

We can best judge the vitality of a democratic community, we believe, by how inclusive it is—not by how many voices it has excluded but by how many are engaged, not by how many people are incarcerated but by how many can speak out as citizens. [That's why he] suggested to a local judge concerned with 'turnstile justice' (as he characterized the problem then) that offenders who are sent behind bars from his bench, eventually released, then returned before his bench again might fare better by reading literature and talking about it around a table on a college campus. And so might the rest of the community as well. (679)

What Waxler intended when he formed the program was not simply to stop turnstile justice but to revitalize democracy and engage community. And the obstacles to community are everywhere. Isreal's antagonist in that last piece, the one who keeps calling him his street name, clearly lacks that incentive to engage a new community. So do the ones loitering on the street near Jesse's home. Isreal and Jesse, however, have found it—they had their chance to assemble and write and share what would otherwise go unwritten and unconsidered. They were cultivated to become better citizens with the rhetorical arts. As Kurt Spellmeyer describes it:

The relevance of the arts, Adorno suggests, lies in their promising of 'what is not real' (122), and this openness sets the stage for an experimental 'heterogeneity' tolerated less and less everywhere today except in the humanities, where it is actually prized (132). Precisely because of this ability to occupy the liminal space between reality and representation, the arts and the allied humanities—English in particular—are the social sites best positioned to preserve the diversity now under siege. (575)

When we assemble in the name of "experimental heterogeneity," we are searching collaboratively for "what is not real" within the discursive hegemony constraining us. Or as Roberts-Miller might argue, when we assemble to challenge group identities, we are cultivating critical thinking about the links we make, at times, imperceptibly between what we see in our built environment—and from this evidence what we would claim to be true—and what we might believe about ourselves, others, and the real—based on what we imagine should be real. When Jesse returns home, he literally sees the people on the street differently just as Isreal, returning to the streets in his mind,

imagines an encounter with an associate differently. Both resist the lure of their old group identities: criminal leader and fearful homeowner. This is a small but significant first step toward steering public discourse in the right direction or, as Jenny Edbauer might characterize it, a positive first step toward generating a new and more inclusive rhetorical ecology.

These links that I have been making between assembly, agency, writing, and citizenship in an ever-changing public sphere may challenge some weary of overreaching. Amy Wan, for example, has conceded that most “scholars use citizenship and its rhetorical cachet as a way to imagine students as agents beyond the institution,” as I am doing here, but that the problem with this is that

these invocations are premised upon unspoken, casual, or ambient assumptions about citizenship itself: the belief that one only needs to act as a citizen through participation in a community or society in order to become a citizen, or the resulting wholesale acceptance of citizenship as a meaningful product of effective writing instruction. This is not sufficient. (33)

Wan’s concern is that our casual or “aspirational” linking between citizenship and writing begs too many questions. Looking out from the classroom into society makes her wonder how exactly learning to write makes you a better citizen. Writing teachers who claim that they are doing citizenship by teaching writing should probably think more critically about the habits they are instilling in students that, in the teachers’ minds, will lead them to become better citizens beyond their classrooms. The problem I see is not in the warning but in the assumption that citizenship is best learned from a classroom on campus.

So much more can be seen and so much more can be gained from classrooms that assemble college students and citizen-writers in the community in ways that confront the “fear of difference” that Fleming has articulated—the challenge to make attributions of agency to each other as they search, collaboratively, for a better public life together. What happens as a result of those attributions, of course, is uncertain and not entirely ours to determine, as Paula Mathieu and Diana George remind us:

Successful circulation of public writing is not achieved by going it alone, but through networks of relationships, in alliances between those in power and those without, through moments of serendipity. Any changes made or attempted can’t be located solely on the page, or in the act of composition, but also are found in the writing’s circulation, in how it works in the world, fostering conversation, creating pressure, and even creating unexpected allies. (144)

Our public work with students and community members may foster conversation, create pressure or unexpected allies, or it may not. Outcomes can be vexing. This why Nathaniel Rivers and Ryan Weber do not require their students in a first-year-writing

class to go public with their proposed interventions into the rhetorical ecologies that interest them: they do not want to subject their students to the messy experience of trying to reach short-term outcomes in a semester or—perhaps the worst experience of all—failing to notice or even appropriately respond to those outcomes. Outcomes are not easily led by rhetoric. Fleming’s study of Cabrini Green has proven that. But it has also proven a truism I can verify: what is easy to do is not necessarily worth doing.

I learned that during my first writing workshop at the jail in 2006 as a volunteer with a local nonprofit organization, Offender Aid and Restoration. Nothing was guaranteed. My time slot and classroom location, the chapel—one of three open spaces for gatherings like this—were easily taken from me like canteen by stronger, more powerful service providers, typically ministers. Men I came to know over many months of drafting and digging into the vulnerabilities of their lives would one day be gone—released, shipped to prison—without warning, much less a goodbye. Lockdowns because of fighting, airborne viruses, or no particularly good reason would stop all volunteer activities like mine indefinitely. Even when we had class, it could be interrupted by guards—students pulled—at any time. You would think jail would be the one place, the one classroom, without tardiness or unexcused absences, but students were late all the time or would sometimes fail to show due to court dates, visits, etc. Or they would be stranded on the tier without an escort to the chapel—punished for something they did—or did not do—the day before.

The disjuncture between education and incarceration is real, one that we sometimes manage to pass through but that we cannot pass off or pretend not to see or smooth over with our own heroic ideas of overcoming the barriers—passing notes, contraband, through razor wire, as Tobi Jacobi describes it. This disjuncture is widely known by educators working with prisoners. Buzz Alexander, the founder of Prison Creative Arts Program at the University of Michigan, describes his workshops with prisoners and college students as “chaotic, disrupted, difficult, contentious, marked by struggle, collaborative and in the end familial. What keeps it going is that we trust everyone to make it happen” (PMLA 551). What they trust is that they *can* and *should* help each other resolve the struggle for identity that writing opens up. Stephen Hartnett, another long-time prison teacher and communications scholar, adds that what you learn from the experience is that “by transforming the terror in your life into art and by then bravely sharing it, you learn to trust yourself and earn the respect of others” (PMLA 552). It is a rare opportunity in a place better known for squashing opportunity.

Even now, six years later, after having grown my volunteer writing workshop into Open Minds, a part of our curriculum in the English department, an interdisciplinary program in the humanities, and a source of continuing education units to incarcerated students—a program that has won grants and awards from my university and is praised by the Sheriff, I still experience what Alexander calls the chaotic struggle of assembly, and I still treasure it. Assembling may not change the larger realities and injustices of incarceration, but it matters a great deal to the ones assembling: prisoners; college students and their professors in Women’s Studies and Religious Studies and African-American studies and English; and hundreds of people, incarcerated and free, who

have taken these classes and will go on to inhabit the real spaces and the ideals of our shared public life, and whose words and actions mattered in class and will matter in the lives they will lead after class..

Sometimes when I'm telling someone about this work, the person will ask me if it scares me to go to the jail. My college students who join me in the sanctuary sometimes face the same wide eyes or even anger when they tell friends or family they're taking a class with "those people." It takes a while—and a willing listener—to convey the reality that the experience is humbling and inspiring. Other listeners, of course, already share that feeling—a heartfelt, head-nodding contentment that it's great sharing your story with prisoners sharing theirs. Both reactions are intense. I've never gotten blasé. And it's taken me years to see that these reactions come from the same nerve center. They show awareness that a door has been opened that everyone thought was shut. You can hear the sounds of prisoners now, their voices mingling with yours in public. And in that instant, you imagine what our world would be like—what public discourse would sound like—if we heard more of it, more of us. And you know right away how you feel about that.

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