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## Keywords: Prison

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## Keywords: Prison

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Border crossing, razor wire, transformation: words and images that pervade writing about prison literacy and pedagogy. Although literacy programs in prison have existed for decades, it is only during the last twenty years or so that scholarship in this area has begun to increase. What has also increased is the number of incarcerated American citizens; this number is currently over two million (*One in One Hundred*). Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of those incarcerated have lower literacy rates than the general population; the connections between incarceration, poverty and low levels of literacy have been well documented (Jacobi, “Foreword”). The need for literacy programs for the most marginalized and stigmatized members of our community as well as access to information, research and scholarship about the practice and theoretical understanding of teaching in carceral environments seems clear. The purpose of this brief synthesis essay is to provide an overview of the more recent scholarship on prison literacies and pedagogies. For the purposes of this essay, I have sorted the work into four groups: 1) materials that reflect on the experience of teaching in a correctional facility setting; 2) overviews of specific programs; 3) material investigating inmate literacy/literacies; and 4) edited collections of inmate writing. Negotiating the experience of teaching in the often tense prison environment and the competing demands of the prison, the school, or the workshop setting can be a bewildering experience for novice and veteran prison teachers alike. These resources all provide useful and important background material for prison teachers and researchers.

It is important to have a clear picture of the prison population and their literacy needs as well as an understanding of the history of the prison system and the place of writing within that system. Detailed information and statistics about prison literacy can be found at the website of the *National Assessment of Adult Literacy and Literacy Among Prison Inmates*, a comprehensive 2003 study that assessed literacy in state and federal prisons. “Literacy Behind Prison Walls,” a 1994 study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics as part of the National Adult Literacy Survey, although dated, also provides relevant information. Additionally, *Prison Literacy: Implications for Programs and Assessment*, a report from the National Center for Adult Literacy, provides important historical material and an overview of what the writers of the report believe to be a workable, sustainable model of a prison literacy program. The Bureau of Justice Statistics website offers a wealth of information about the US prison

system. Finally, H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*, which is both a collection of inmate writing and a historical overview of the American prison system with emphasis on the evolution of inmate writing, is an invaluable resource for understanding both the history of the American penal system and the evolution of inmate writing.

Additionally, the 2004 winter edition of *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service Learning and Community Literacy* special issue devoted to "Prison Literacies, Narratives and Community Connections" guest edited by Tobi Jacobi and Patricia E. O'Connor offers the opportunity to foreground the "complexities of 'how it is' for prison writers" and to explore the difficulty of "negotiating student and teacher agency in prisons, shaped by many individual stakeholders with disparate goals and interests" (Jacobi 2). The special issue includes a diverse array of material: inmate stories, essays, poems and artwork, articles addressing creative writing and drama workshops, university/prison collaborations and service-learning programs, as well as book reviews and an exhaustive bibliography of print, electronic and film resources. Several of the resources mentioned in this essay are in this issue of *Reflections*; all of the articles in the special issue are useful and important. Although now eight years old, the *Reflections* special issue is an invaluable resource for anyone for anyone currently teaching in or contemplating teaching in a carceral environment.

Not surprisingly, given the intense and complex nature of the experience, the largest body of work on prison teaching and literacies is devoted to personal accounts and narratives of the experience of teaching in prisons or jails. Two of these—Richard Shelton's *Crossing the Yard: Thirty Years as a Prison Volunteer* and Judith Tannenbaum's *Disguised as Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin*—offer powerful, in-depth accounts. Shelton's book describes the remarkable thirty years he spent teaching, volunteering and establishing creative writing workshops in numerous Arizona state prisons; Tannenbaum's book is an intensely personal account of her experience of teaching writing workshops in San Quentin. Both books are essential for understanding not only what it is like to teach writing in prison but also for the insights they offer into the American prison industrial complex and the transformative nature of these workshops for both teachers and inmate students.

Other material in this category explores teaching college writing classes in prison and the difficulty for both teachers and inmates of negotiating the competing demands of the prison environment and the academic world. The 1994 article "Walking the Line: Teaching Remedial Writing in a Correctional Facility Setting" by Henry Crimmel is representative in its descriptions of the prison environment and of the challenges faced by correctional facility writing teachers. Crimmel, in his discussion of teaching a developmental writing class in a correctional

facility college program, describes the difficulties and perhaps unresolvable contradictions of teaching college writing in prison. More recently, Jane Mahar, in her 2004 article "You Probably Don't Even Know I Exist': Notes from a College Prison Program," details her experience in teaching a pre-college writing class in a college program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Mahar notes the unique environment of Bedford Hills, a prison with extensive and effective programs for the women inmates in this maximum security institution, including the college program she taught in. Mahar focuses on the conditions that brought the women to prison as well as their own lack of confidence in their writing skills and the importance of writing skills to the women. Mahar notes that "If I have learned anything as a result of my work in the college program at Bedford Hills, it is that . . . writing—as hard as it is to teach and learn—is a skill that will not only help the women succeed in their college course, it will help them succeed in negotiating prison life and life after prison in a way that few other skills will" (97). In her descriptions of the inmate students' struggles and successes with writing, Mahar makes an argument for the importance of such programs.

The college program in Bedford Hills is one example of a correctional facility program that is a community/prison partnership. As Jacobi points out in her Foreword to the *Reflections* special issue, there is an array of literacy programs available in prisons and jails, from voluntarily taught creative writing workshops to for-credit college programs. Such programs are important in establishing community connections with groups of people who might otherwise never have contact with each other, providing post-secondary educational opportunities beyond the mandated GED (General Equivalency Degree Programs), and providing spaces for inmate writers to share their writing, develop as writers, and reflect on their lives and experiences.

Increasing number of colleges and universities have established university-prison/jail partnerships. One long-running and successful program is SpeakOut!, which is housed in Colorado State University's Community Literacy Center. Originally established in 2004 by Tobi Jacobi as a writing workshop for women inmates at Larimer County Detention Center, the workshop is facilitated by graduate and undergraduate students as well as a faculty member. The semester-long SpeakOut! program culminates in publication of a collection of the workshop participants' writing (*SpeakOut! Journal*) as well as a reading that is attended by both inmates and "outside" visitors. In her article "Writing Workshops as Alternative Education for Incarcerated Women," Jacobi describes the structure and rationale for the SpeakOut! Program, noting that the purpose of the workshop is to "engage members of the Larimer County Community Correction program in literacy work based on life experiences and writing as a tool for understanding and change" (52). Jacobi examines

the educational needs of incarcerated women and the contribution of the workshop to the participants' needs for self-reflection, civic engagement, peer collaboration and growth as writers.

There is a growing number of programs that establish connections between students and inmates. One of the most extensive is Lori Pompas' Inside/Out Prison Exchange program, which brings university students and inmates together to explore many subject areas. Simone Davis writes at length about her experience teaching a writing class in the Inside/Out program in her article "Inside-Out: The Reach and Limits of a Prison Program." However, as Jacobi points out in her article "Slipping Pages Through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail," "such work can be complicated by the challenge of context" as programs are limited in their scope by limitations of time, access and the prison or jail environment (70). Despite the challenges involved in creating and sustaining such programs, articles such as Jacobi's and Davis' demonstrate their importance.

Other interesting models exist for university-prison collaboration. For example, Tom Kerr's article "Between Ivy and Razor Wire: A Case of Correctional Correspondence," in the 2004 special issue of *Reflections*, describes a program Kerr created for his students who were not able to work directly with inmates. Kerr's course, "Writing for Social Justice, Writing for Change," established correspondence between Kerr's students and inmates from around the country. Through this work, students confronted prior conceptions and media constructions about inmates; the correspondence worked at "shattering dehumanized stereotypes of convicts with each stroke of the pen" (69). Kerr's course is one example of possibilities for collaboration when direct contact with inmates in such programs as Jacobi's SpeakOut! is not possible

Many university/prison collaborations are through college programs offered in correctional facilities. Although college programs in prison have existed since the 1970's (following the Attica prison riots), the elimination of Pell Grants to prisoners in 1994 meant that many college prison programs ceased to function. In his 2011 CCCC presentation "Prison Education as a Human Right," Lockard notes that "[p]rior to the 1994 legislative ban there were hundreds of higher education programs behind prison walls. That number dropped precipitously to a small handful of programs (Welsh, Ubah, Tewksberry and Taylor, Petersilia 33-34), even as the incarcerated population of the United States continued to swell to new record levels every year." However, prison college programs still exist; according to Lockard, the 2005 Bureau of Justice statistics show that 35% of US prisons "offer college-level courses." Lockard claims, however, that these numbers are somewhat misleading as "these are usually low-level non-academic courses usually offered by community colleges." Still, the number of university-prison programs seems to be expanding, with

robust programs offered by Bard College (the Bard Prison Initiative), the Education Justice Project of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Boston University, Goucher College, Arizona State University, Princeton University, and others. Despite the importance of such collaborations, little recent published scholarship or research is available on such programs; publications such as those previously mentioned by Crimmel, Laughlin, and Mahar, while valuable resources, raise many questions that still need to be investigated. For those seeking information on college/prison partnerships, websites of the Bard Prison Initiative, the Education Justice Project, and the University of Michigan-based Prison Creative Arts Project provide valuable information.

Inmate writing is produced in a site where writing and literacy is highly regulated. Despite restrictions and regulations on this writing, a tremendous amount of inmate writing has been produced, much of it in various manifestations of workshops and college programs. Scholars are beginning to look closely at inmate writing in an attempt to define and understand this work. For example, Anita Wilson, in her article "Four Days and a Breakfast: Time, Space and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community," provides exploration of what "literacy" might mean in a correctional facility setting by examining inmate literacy within the concepts of time and space. In her ethnographic study, Wilson uses inmate interviews, discussions, and texts to explore how inmates create what she terms a "third space," a way for incarcerated individuals to "make sense of the various dimensions of the prison world" (68) and to maintain some sense of agency and individuality. Through her interviews and discussions with inmates, Wilson provides a space for inmates to speak and defines her data as collectively owned (69). In addition to presenting important information on prison literacies, Wilson raises questions about the nature of research in prison and the importance of the researcher's stance towards her research subjects; she states that "[p]rison research would indeed be 'obscene' if it denied the true voice of those upon whom the research rests" (69). The methods and ethics of research in prison are an area that perhaps calls for greater investigation and discussion.

Several other researchers investigate questions of inmate literacies. Paul Butler, in his article "The GED as Transgender Literacy: Performing in the Learning/Acquisition Borderland," also examines the complexities of inmate literacy in the context of an inmate's struggle to pass the GED exam. Most recently in "Conflating Language and Offense: Composing in an Incarcerated Space," Joseph Burzynski investigates how basic writing and English as a Second Language (ESL) approaches can "inform and create tensions" in the prison context (12). Additionally, Patricia E. O'Connor offers a unique analysis of how inmates talk about crime in her book *Speaking of Crime: Narratives of Prisoners*. O'Connor "uses the tools of discourse analysis to look inside 'set aside' lives" by analyzing narratives

elicited during nineteen in-depth interviews of maximum security prisoners (2). O'Connor's work provides an important perspective on analyzing inmate discourse. All of these writers offer examinations of inmate literacy and language practices, an area that needs further attention if we are to understand how to teach language and literacy in a prison environment

Anne Folwell Stanford also examines inmate literacy in the context of writing done by women inmates in Cook County Jail, Chicago; Stanford focuses on the poetry written by the women in the workshop she voluntarily teaches. Stanford names the work of the women as an "act of resistance" and provides an analysis of the work of women in the workshop, concentrating on the writers' constructions of identity and solidarity (277). Stanford's article provides many excerpts from the writing of the women as well as an analysis of their work; like Jacobi in "Writing Workshops as Alternative Literacy Education for Women," she provides a discussion of the benefits of the workshop setting. Both Stanford and Jacobi provide an important analysis of the importance of literacy instruction in a workshop setting for inmate writers.

While investigations of how inmates use language and acquire different forms of literacy is an area that is only beginning to be explored, inmate writing consists of a sizeable body of work that provides an introduction to the experience of incarceration. While the following texts may have slightly different foci, all provide invaluable insights into not only the experience of incarceration but also to the variety and power of writing produced by incarcerated writers. As mentioned earlier, Franklin's anthology provided a diverse selection of such writing along with an accompanying history. While Franklin's work focuses on the work of American prison writing, *The Prison Where I Live* is an international anthology of writing edited by Siobhan C. Dowd. Several works—Wally Lamb's well-known *Couldn't Keep it to Myself* and Judith A. Schleffler's *Wall Tappings*—collect the work of women inmates. The PEN Prison Writing Center along with a prison writers mentoring program sponsors a national writing contest for incarcerated individuals. *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing*, edited by Belle Gale Chevigny, is a collection of prize-winning work from that contest.

This short essay only touches on the amount of material available about prison teaching and writing and is intended as a beginning guide to the resources available to those who are interested in teaching/researching prison pedagogy and literacy. The field of prison literacies and pedagogy is still an emerging one that perhaps still needs time to formulate coherent pedagogies and research questions and approaches. The need for both literacy teaching in correctional facility settings and research into those settings seems clear. Research shows that prison education programs have a positive effect on the recidivism rate; too often, however, these programs

are limited to GED programs that do not offer inmates the chance to participate in literacy activities beyond the most basic. Programs such as those described above are important for inmates to continue to obtain education, literacy skills, the chance for reflection and collaboration, and the opportunity to use writing to explore their worlds and lives. Too often, however, these programs are vulnerable and contingent on funding, available personnel, and the receptivity of the correctional institution to the programs; we need to understand all we can about best practices in establishing, teaching and maintaining workshops and university/prison college programs. It is also important to remember that most inmates are eventually released and returned to their home communities; literacy programs can be a vital step in helping inmates re-establish themselves productively in their communities. Patricia E. O'Connor notes in her *Afterword* to the *Reflections* special issue that "[t]he growing warehouses of incarcerated human capital represent an enormous, wasted human resource . . . we need to work together with the incarcerated to devise pathways to productive lives and re-claimed communities" (207). The resources described in this brief essay can provide an important starting place for those who wish to begin rebuilding communities, creating important community connections, and reclaiming lives.

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