"Just Sitting in a Cell, You and Me": Sponsoring Writing in a County Jail

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Entering jail is an assault on the senses. Thick recirculated air feels either drafty or stuffy, never comfortable. The walls protrude with a stark, dingy white, bare of character or care. The smell is sterile, some unidentifiable cleanser stinging the tongue and nostrils. Doors clang shut and open via invisible mechanics. The wall-mounted eye of the panopticon is omnipresent.

And while volunteers and inmates might share these visceral experiences of entering the institution, to enter *into* jail is not the same as being "in" jail. To be "in" is to be monitored—watched and listened to without exception or reprieve. To be in jail is to follow unwritten laws of behavior and written but unvoiced rules of engagement. To be in jail is to exist under the constant gaze of captors and yet remain unseen, voices unheard, despite unrelenting surveillance. Upon entering the confinement, a jailed person becomes an "inmate," categorized by a cell number, a charge, maybe an offense; she is stripped of clothing, of the tools of contemporary communication, jewelry and other personal items, stripped of the many "selves" we value as humans: self-expression, self-esteem, self-worth. To be in jail is in many ways the antithesis of self. Our work volunteering as weekly writing workshop leaders makes visible the contradictions of incarceration as we gain brief access to the highly mediated space of jail, one that seeks both to erase and change the individual. She is marked as both deviant and dangerous and as a canvas to be modeled and revised. This essay will explore the complicated relationship between jailed selves and self-publication through the lens of university-sponsored writing workshops. Our experience with the writers at a county jail in northern Colorado suggests that there are multiple moments of engagement that offer varied opportunities to publish self/self-publish.

The SpeakOut! writing workshop is a program sponsored by Colorado State University's Community Literacy Center whose mission is "to create alternative literacy opportunities in order to educate and empower underserved populations" (http://literacy.colostate.edu/about/). Weekly workshops are led by teams comprised of local university students, faculty, and community members. Over the course of twelve weeks, facilitators invite incarcerated people to read and write together and to publish original works in the *SpeakOut! Journal* at the end of each workshop cycle (May and December). Writers compose in genres ranging from poetry to rants to science fiction and offer perspectives on family, loss, joy, nature, philosophy and life in the 21st century. Many focus on the urgent present: life in jail, finding community, losing touch with family, feeling trapped and static, as Garza's "Jailbird" suggests here.

Jailbird by Baby Garza, *SpeakOut! Journal***, Spring 2016**

Sitting in a cell it's just you and me
Trapped like animals, deprived of being free.
Without any commissary and no money on the phone
It really makes me feel like I'm in this alone.
Oh God how I wish I could just be free
This loneliness is just tearing and eating at me.
As I go day by deal, meal after meal, dis safer diss
I wonder how I'm going to make it out this.
I'm a jailbird through and through
Just killing time, me and you.
It's as if I fell off the face of the earth and died
As I slowly forget what it's like on the outside.
The feeling of fresh grass, or the warmth of the sun
Yet I know missing these, I'm not the only one.
There are other jailbirds here just like me
Yearning to open their wings, to fly, and be free.
Yet we're trapped like animals, deprived of being free
So it's just sitting in a cell, you and me.

Writing and participation in jail publications provide an opportunity for incarcerated people to document their circumstances and reimagine their authorial self, increasing both the visibility of the numbing impact of incarceration and the desire to literally and figuratively be free. To publish is to raise the voice of a self, perhaps a self-in-process, in transformation, as so many incarcerated writers claim. Yet as Garza's poem exemplifies, to write in confinement is to lose track of the outside, grass, sun, sidewalk, exhaust fumes and street sounds, all replaced by the white noise of jail sameness. To self-publish from jail is never a simple act of getting writing out since the self that emerges onto a page is always already mediated through jail. Throughout this essay, we articulate the tensions that emerge between a hopeful spirit of engagement and the powerful responsibility that comes with institutional literacy sponsorship both in practice and publication. Our jail literacy program attempts to sponsor and make space for the emergence of narratives that counter and suppress the experiences of incarcerated people in the form of the bi-annual *SpeakOut! Journal*. Even as volunteer facilitators join writers inside to read and write words intended to counter assumptions and allow incarcerated people to construct and publish conceptions of self and reclaim space on "the face of the earth," we find that sponsorship behind razor wire is not without compromise.

Sponsoring Writing Behind Bars

> "They are not the good guys, I remind myself. But they seem good to me" (29).
>
> —Deborah Appleman, "Teaching in the Dark: The Promise and Pedagogy of Creative Writing in Prison"

As Appleman suggests teaching behind bars is not a straightforward endeavor; yet the need is great. According to a 2003 study of education and prison by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 40% of federal and state prisoners have not graduated from high school compared to 18% in the general population (Harlow 1). More recent survey data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics found that in 2014, 30% of prisoners continue to have less than a high school degree compared with 14% of the general population (Rampey 5). The discrepancies are heightened when analyzing attainment beyond high school; only 6% of incarcerated people had attained an associate's degree or higher compared to 37% of the general population (Rampey 5). Since people incarcerated within state and federal prisons must be given access to GED programs, there is some evidence that encouraging education moves beyond individual advancement; the Prison Studies Project reports that those who complete a GED or other education program while incarcerated experience about 20% less recidivism than their counterparts without similar educational programming (prisonstudiesproject.org). Too, the prison college programs that were largely decimated by legislation in 1995 are slowly regaining momentum (see Jacobi "Austerity" for more on literacy and prison higher education). In a country where, as Deborah Brandt argues, literacy has become a means of production, supporting literacy development for incarcerated people, especially those with short-term sentences, is paramount to their success upon release.

Sponsorship requires teachers to grapple with ethical and social positioning of students and literacy opportunities that are made available as we explore "the inherent tensions in promoting freedom of self-expression to the incarcerated when even their bathroom and shower habits are regulated" (Appleman 25). As such, SpeakOut! program volunteers act as direct literacy sponsors for the 60 incarcerated people and 30 youth who attend the weekly workshops, enacting Brandt's well-established work as "agents . . . who enable, support, teach and model as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" (*Literacy in American Lives* 19). Like other prison writing programs such as *Herstory* in New York and the *Oregon Prison Project*, bringing writing workshops into a jail setting provides incarcerated people with a creative outlet and intellectual engagement. Sponsorship from the university and jail, then, both enable and inhibit the program's mission. Without the sanctioned cooperation of both, the SpeakOut! writing program wouldn't exist. Yet that sponsorship comes at a cost that makes murky the freedom to express that participants ultimately exercise.

Workshop facilitators play the most direct role in this relationship. Brandt identifies sponsors as "usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched

than the sponsored," who "nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite" (3-4). While this definition is uncomfortable—facilitators do not presume to be more knowledgeable than the workshop participants—its notion of being more entrenched in literacy rings true. As college students and faculty, facilitators are regularly exposed to new print and digital media that can inspire writing in different and richer ways than the spare jail library and sameness of days. Their regular presence in classrooms provides tangible purpose for writing and thought which far exceeds day-to-day life in jail. This is not to say that imprisoned writers *cannot* find inspiration to write, but rather that they are not as readily immersed in a world that *expects* it from them. For this reason, the presence of volunteers associated with a university sparks a kind of excited academia within the workshop. Facilitators enter workshops armed with physical and ideological inspiration for writing (i.e. poetry, photos, videos, objects, quotations) and an excitement to share and listen. Facilitators use these tools to transform a dreary jail classroom into a space inviting reflection and creativity. These ideas and tools (e.g. photos of families circa 1950, clips from Planet Earth, household objects not found in a jail) equip workshop facilitators to sponsor literacy development and spark desire for publication.

Although a process for feedback and editing is incorporated in the workshops, even single-session attendees benefit from participation. They are afforded the opportunity to separate from the anonymity of their shared cells and engage in verbal and written conversation weekly. While we cannot ever be fully beyond the confines of jail, many participants write and speak whatever is on their minds. Within the verbally-published, unrevised hour of the workshop, they share opinions about jail staff, revisit traumatic experiences of abuse, laugh and make jokes, lament separation from the families they miss so much, and wonder about the state of the world. Sometimes, writers engage in heated debate over political and social ideals. Occasionally we critically analyze a poem. At one recent workshop, the group watched a short documentary describing the reinstitution of wolves into Yellowstone National Park. We discussed the ecology of the area, and then, like always, the women wrote. Amongst fantastical narratives about wolves returning home and personal connections about being separated from a place, one woman wrote an extended metaphor about the way Americans treat unwanted beings. She equated the wolves to dust swept under the rug rather than utilized as useful soil in a garden. She saw in this metaphor herself and her peers, locked away and ignored rather than utilized as a valuable resource for the community. As she read her piece the groups cheered her astute viewpoint, layering their own sponsorships onto those invited by facilitators. Participants across twelve years of program evaluations echo the value of space for identity work:

> "Don't <u>EVER</u> stop coming to this place! You, your program gives my thoughts/feeling/past a voice that is otherwise <u>unheard</u>!
>
> "SpeakOut helps bring light to what matters."

> "Thank you for your excellence and time and dedication to help us in succeeding to know our inner beauty."

> "SpeakOut has helped me to be able to express some of the feeling of my mother's sudden death. I believe SpeakOut is one of the best programs we have here that it allows us to express ourselves it also encourages us to express ourselves without fear of getting in trouble or being belittled for our feelings."

Locating the workshop within the jail also clearly activates the institution as a literacy sponsor for facilitators and participants. Materially, they provide the paper (unlined) and pencils (golf sized) for each workshop as well as a significant contribution to the cost of publishing the biannual *SpeakOut! Journals*. Beyond space and writing tools, they ensure that there is sufficient staffing to hold the workshops and rearrange schedules for special events. In the jail's view, these are allowances driven by security regulations and sanctioned by the head of security; in other words, our volunteer program depends upon the assurance that we (volunteers and SpeakOut! practices and policies) do not pose a risk to the security of the institution. In the general population, prisoners are limited to the number of pencils, sheets of paper, and books they can have in their possession at a time. While these rules appear to be arbitrary, the fact that we have unlimited pencils, paper, and books in our workshops is an institutional privilege. While jail staff often promote and support the program, they also have the power to deny attendance for behavioral concerns or simply because they would rather not pull people from their cells. On nights where there isn't enough staffing, workshops are cancelled, even though facilitators rarely need or seek assistance from officers. Whether intentional or not, jail staff becomes the gatekeepers of the program, determining who can or can't be present based upon behavioral standards beyond our reach and censorship of written and visual content before publication. Indeed, the jail both offers the opportunity to connect with the population and limits interaction, both enabling and blockading efforts to frame literacy as a tool of empowerment. The contradictions this dichotomy presents are innumerable. Jail volunteers are regarded as leaders, representatives of the jail's mission, but are also required to follow guidelines regarding dress code, demeanor, and conduct. Volunteer college students with little or no experience in jail are considered to be more capable of upholding expectations than the prisoners who must live them. As interlopers of a jailed community, facilitators are privileged guests afforded a view of the inside along with the extended responsibility of maintaining conduct. As such, the university-as-sponsor is marked by ideological complicity. Recruiting and training undergraduate and graduate students as volunteers promotes a critical sociocultural approach to literacy as does the project's reliance upon grant makers' continued interest in providing support. Even as we argue that programs like SpeakOut! work to encourage creative counternarratives, it is impossible to ignore the reinscription of power dynamics that sponsorship by institutions of corrections and higher education impose upon the form and content of the work produced. In short, it is primarily the institutionally mediated self that can be published.

Publishing Self

Define by Jeff G, *SpeakOut! Journal*, **Spring 2016**

Knock on your door
You're under arrest
What's going on
Is this a test
A fog rolls in
You do your best
To try to stand up
To the pain in your chest
Now you're in jail
Yeah, be our guest
It's a real party
A members only fest
But I'm still not sure
Why it's called a-rest

Although much of this work seeks to interrupt representations perpetuated by the media of prisoner-as-deviant or prisoner-as-victim, it remains challenging to capture the attention of a general public trained to consume the alluring sound byte. The moment a person changes into the infamous orange jumpsuit, they join a community largely mislabeled by the outside public and predetermined by a system. As Jeff G's poem outlines, it is a position of bewilderment, pain, powerlessness, and tension, a far cry from the break from society, "a-rest" as he playfully suggests. Michael Warner argues that "a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address…. its success depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity" (422). This presents a useful tool for understanding the tensions that emerge when a public and its identity markers are co-opted by institutional framing like case numbers, cell assignments, work duties, and perennially misspelled names. The narratives that emerge from spaces like the SpeakOut! Workshop encourage alternate and simultaneous narratives of self. Such identities reside in a counterpublic and work to counternarrate an inevitable "othering" by positioning writers as agents within their own stories since, as Warner suggests, counterpublics recognize discursive subordination (424). Yet even this proactive move toward self-determination is unstable since a status of other imposes a kind of flattening of story subjectivity, forever held against the dominant narrative of the criminal. The popular depiction of "inmate" continues to encompass descriptors like "guilty," "vicious," and "addict." The larger public's almost automatic trust in the judicial position necessarily places those in confinement in the category of wrong, silencing,

or at the least dictating which of their personal stories, as Lena Karlsson argues, will qualify as socially acceptable neoconfessional narratives about crime and life behind bars (198). The narratives that do capture public imagination—stories of admission, forgiveness, regret, familial hope and redemption—are themselves limiting, pushed to fulfill hegemonic expectations of depictions of the uncivilized (and many are literally deprived of what is civil and civilized) in the name of salvation.

Pressure to produce and publish certain forms of prison writing is significant, then, since writers have the opportunity to become conveyors of narratives that challenge societal expectations of who an inmate is, occupying a self-created enunciative-mode within a liminal counterpublic workshop space. Such counternarratives attempt to permeate assumptions, rousing doubt in the widely accepted "truth" about inmates (controlled by and mediated through publics ranging from dominant media sources to carceral institutions themselves). Within these assumptions, they are, after all, regarded as second class citizens, held in confinement apart from greater society and, if convicted of a felony, refused basic civil rights like voting, sometimes for life. Writers' "selves" have become both highly ordered and diminished as they accumulate identity beyond a name, now also a case number, a room number, a statistic in a facility, a state, a nation. Michael Bamberg suggests that merely introducing this new narrative—one authored by the oppressed themselves—is the "flip-side" of hegemonic complicity (351). But this view ignores the permeating ideals of the system itself. Amanda Crawley argues that the prisoner potentially writes into a transgressive state that is determined by hegemonic power itself. The writers inside who capture the readership of outsiders often craft conceptions of self that align with the current social expectations of reform or rehabilitation (305), writing those narratives of salvation, change, and personal transformation. While counternarratives might be present, their ability to permeate popular consideration relies on the willingness of dominant readership. Many writings sponsored by workshops behind bars operate under the illusion of authorial freedom; it is only with the pointed intentionality of progressive and radical literacy activists and allies that powerful counternarratives can engage with publics beyond jail walls.

This is not to abandon the project of community literacy in confined spaces. As Eli Goldblatt argues, "joint sponsorship" offers a way to rethink the nature of the reciprocity that intentional community-based writing work might engage (140). While the jail and university endorse and promote the program with particular goals in mind (e.g. rehabilitation, reduced recidivism, engaged citizenry), SpeakOut! writers participate for a variety of their own reasons, including reflection on the survival and resilience of self when confined; one writer muses, "I write in order to ease the troubles in my mind. No matter what I write, lists-letter-stories-poems - they all help tame my inner demons!" Kay Adams, founder of the Center for Journal Therapy, identifies the benefits of therapeutic writing as a way to "make meaning of our lives. It helps us integrate and digest individual experiences. Writing allows for authentic expression of real feelings" (Adams, xviii). Another participant reflects: "I write to express my feelings, writing things down is much easier for me to express. It feels good to put all my feelings on paper." The writing process invites expression,

evaluation, and consideration of otherwise unthinkable experiences. While there is pressure to produce particular kinds of prison narratives, writers do readily express desire to redefine themselves and often emphasize longing to be understood by others. One woman wrote, "I hope one day my family sees it and can understand me more and are proud and honored, too." Another responded, "I would hope to open someone (anyone's) mind to something new and meaningful." A third privileges craft: "I love putting beautiful words together to express thoughts, feelings and situations. Each time I write, with each word I choose, I try to reach deeper within myself." She sets goals, hoping to "get to a point where my words can be experienced with all senses." Writers are fully aware of how they are perceived behind bars and want to change such limited perspectives. In telling their own stories of mother/fatherhood, loss, and everyday life, they actively define themselves outside of the narratives that dominant discourse finds comfortable.

Research on pre-release and identity perceptions suggests the need for a broad understanding of self in order to successfully reintegrate into society (Hunter and Greer 220-1; also see Meek 2011). When the desire to claim self is activated (via rehabilitation, indignation, or revelation), the desire to voice and publish narratives of self becomes pressing and can inspire writers toward print to offer alternatives to the conventions of mainstream storying. For example, many SpeakOut! writers choose to use lowercase "i" as the narrative voice in their writing, a move traditionally accepted by the literary world as signifying resistance to authority or the invocation of membership within a counterpublic—yet one that also breaks the dominant stylistic expectations of the general American population. To self-publish, then, is to publish the self, and this reclamation of self is what incarcerated writers so often seek—even as they navigate the gaze of confinement. When asked why she writes, one author responded, "To get to know my self and my thoughts," and while spell check sputters at this phrasing, representing this writer's desire to know her "self" belies the larger challenge.

Although writers might seek to reach the broader public in pursuit of empathy and/or social justice, they largely imagine audiences of people like themselves in order to shift how selves are known and understood as these program evaluations suggest.

> "I hope it helps others who are going through hard times."
>
> "I hope that people who've been through the same stuff as me [read it]."
>
> "I hope everyone will read it. And maybe help others realize what we think and know."

Publication becomes both an opportunity to speak within and across discourse communities and to (re)present complex and multifaceted selves.

Self-Publishing

> "Publishing should have a critical impact as well as a commercial impact, and I know few self-published books like ours that have had a critical impact or have even been reviewed….As the guy putting everyone's writing together in the format of a book, I want the advice of reviewers, editors, and copyeditors. I don't just want to print it" (224). —Dave Coogan, *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs From Jail*

> "...it is the publishers who must join in the struggle with prisoners-subscribers, to liberate the minds of men from the mental shackles of an exploitative, oppressive system. There is no safe middle ground" (94).—Mumia Abu-Jamal, "Revolutionary Literature = Contraband"

The history of published prison writing is rich and varied. While readily traceable to nearly the beginnings of written communication, much prison writing has been documented and widely distributed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in America* (1998) samples work ranging from early 20th century slave songs to the civil rights movement to the contemporary prison industrial complex. Judith Scheffler's *Wall Tappings* (2002) reaches back much farther to represent women's representations of prison experiences from across the globe from 200 AD to the present. Still other texts (i.e. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* edited by Joy James (2005) or *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States* edited by Solinger et al. (2010)) situate writing in an activist stance to point to human rights violations. In-house publications like the *Joint Endeavor* published by inmates of the Texas Dept. of Corrections and the historically significant *Angolite*, the longest running prison newspaper in the United States, circulate primarily among inmates and guards. Others such as *The Fire Inside* sponsored by the California Coalition for Women Prisoners are produced collaboratively by writers inside and out, or recognize the craft and cost of writing inside such as Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford's 2014 collection on women, prison, and writing. Many other prison narratives are written post-incarceration, with the critically acclaimed memoir *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca likely being the most influential. Whether academic, creative, or expository, prison publications make space for valuing and increasing the visibility of experiences and voices that have sometimes been suppressed to the point of extinction.

As rudimentary as this might appear, such platforms are actively dismantled by the criminal justice system (e.g. limited access to books and other print materials, cancellation of educational programs, censorship of writing); writers are often in desperate need of support in order to circulate their stories. While such opportunities do exist, they are hardly common. One long-standing sponsor is the PEN America whose annual prison writing contest has long encouraged literary excellence and engagement among writers inside, even resulting in several anthologies of poetry,

drama, and prose (https://pen.org/about/programs/prison-writing/; see Chevigny). *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, an academic, peer-reviewed publication, has created space for prison writers to participate directly in defining and critiquing the social structures and terms of engagement on prison issues that are conventionally determined by sociologists, psychologists, and academia more generally (http://www.jpp.org/). The most ambitious effort to self-publish prison writing in recent years is the American Prison Writing Archive, a digital humanities project hosted by Doran Larson at Hamilton College, where over 1,200 writings have already been archived with many others in queue for transcription. The Archive's goal echoes the pursuit that many prison writing programs espouse: "to replace speculation on and misrepresentation of prisons, imprisoned people, and prison workers with first-person witness by those who live and work on the receiving end of American criminal justice" (http://apw.dhinitiative.org/). In other words, whether self-published or press-sponsored, publications by and for currently— or formerly—incarcerated individuals provide their authors with a platform for narrating their own stories of imprisonment.

In the passage opening this section, prison writing teacher Dave Coogan points to one of the primary challenges of publishing from prison or jail: status and power. Publication with an established press is far more likely to draw media attention, attract targeted readership and result in writing that fits the expectations of the mainstream public (e.g. dominant discourse). While we admire Coogan's desire to produce a strong text, we do wonder if the writers share his editorial aims. We worry that a dismissal of self-publication is, in fact, a move that risks acquiescing to the very hierarchical structure that the prison represents as Abu Jamal suggests. By insisting on a peer-reviewed publication, doesn't Coogan reinforce the power of the dominant discourse? Doesn't this conformity to professional editing risk erasing alternative and equally powerful discourse? Too, the constraints of and lengthy publication process of many popular and academic presses make self-publication the only reasonable option available for writers in jail, many of whom are eager to see their words in print before court dates, further dissolution of familial relationships, and as a stepping stone for other educational opportunities.

The *SpeakOut! Journal* seeks to dismantle this need for broader review and consideration in exchange for a publication that represents the diverse educational and writerly experiences of authors inside. Our process is quick, only about 12 weeks from the conception of early drafts to the realization of the printed journal. During each 90-minute session, most writers produce between three and five drafts. Some of these near completion, others write only a sentence or two. In all workshops, writers can submit the poetry and prose they produced either that night or during the previous week for comment and editing. Many prefer to spend time with their work before submitting, taking the opportunity to complete their own edits before showing it to broader audiences. While this process mirrors the workshop model used in many university and community writing workshops, we argue that it also constitutes the beginning of a self-publishing sequence that moves across a variety of readers and publics. Limiting self-publication to its literal association with material production and in opposition to mainstream or academic publication is too narrow a conception

for contemporary community literacy work; rather, we advocate a more expansive understanding of the moment of publication as evidenced by our experiences with writers in the SpeakOut! workshops. We observe the moment of publication as emerging before the print journal is even imagined. In workshops, participants produce their thoughts for the first time, introducing an initial publication for consideration for their own public. For some writers, especially those who are less comfortable with the label of "writer," the act of sharing their new work constitutes first publication as they test out ideas on an often empathetic audience. Next they often submit their work to facilitators for transcription, marking a second point of publication. By typing the words of incarcerated writers as composed, workshop volunteers reproduce their ideas in a format considered more professional by both the greater public and the workshop community. Two copies are returned to writers (one clean and one with comments). This point of publication often invites distribution as authors transcribe copies to circulate within the jail, send them to family and friends via post and/or archive them for later use in the course to demonstrate productivity.

This is not to imply that no editing takes place outside of initial production or in any other self-publication. Since building and supporting literacy flexibility is a program goal, encouraging writers to draft, revise, and rewrite is a central part of our work. Facilitators offer mentor texts, visual and audio inspiration, and engaging prompts. The authors offer insight and experiment with language to demonstrate their truth. The comments writers receive on typed manuscripts encourage stylistic changes in format or ask for more depth or specificity, but rarely include traditional "edits" for grammar or spelling. Rather than focusing on conventions, we aim to open conversation in an effort to maintain the integrity of the author's work. Writers are encouraged to revise their work based on the feedback before submitting for yet another step of publication, the *SpeakOut! Journal*. The lack of access to computers within the jail prevents authors from the sole responsibility of producing their work in print, so CLC staff work to ensure the authorial intent of the manuscripts, honoring the artistic choices of the writers, many of whom choose to maintain their original effort.

Before the final publication of the journals, in a final attempt to ensure intentionality, available authors review a 'proof' copy of the journal at their third opportunity for publication—a live reading attended by other jail prisoners and a handful of community members. While the pragmatic purpose of this reading is to catch our editor's typos, it provides writers with the opportunity to publish both their printed and unprinted work within their own public. These readings allow authors to experience their writing with their audience, relishing in outbursts of laughter, shared tears, and expressions of support in the form of snaps and cheers. Writers whose work encompasses a more auditory quality are able to present their work as intended, producing their own voicing of the words and incorporating rhythms that do not translate into written form. Constrained by rules stemming from the jail and the university, this is the only opportunity (outside of their initial writing) for writers to voice an uncensored version of their work. While printed versions of the work censor curse words and generally eliminate the most direct critiques of the jail system,

writers perform their work as they wish. Even with the omnipresent gaze of guards in the performance space, the energy of artistic freedom exudes among attendees and performers. In this moment of publication, readers and writers spout the human truth of the people who are controlled behind cell doors.

The most public and fixed moment of publication lies with the printing of the bi-annual *SpeakOut! Journal*. These self-published books have the goal of giving authority and dignity to the words of incarcerated adults and youth. The 200+ page books are produced at a professional printing shop with a full color, glossy cover usually featuring the artwork of one or two program participants. For many jail writers, publication is no more or less than the dignification of their words and validation of their life experiences. To one woman, being published means "That I took a risk and put my thoughts and feelings out there for strangers to read." The women expect and understand that their words—their laments about their situation, their letters to their families, their fantastical fictions—will be printed as intended, made available to, as one woman said, "Anyone that needs to read that they are worth it and so much more." Self-publication in jail, then, is a process that often begins with immediate audiences and transforms as rhetorical situations and imagined readers emerge.

Even so, the reality of the print publication is that it can only approximate the full intentionality of authors, and we participate in a range of censoring activities. The jail requires that each submission—artwork and text—be reviewed for content, denying inclusion of pieces of visual or literary art that seems to depict gang affiliation, criticism of the jail, representations of jail employees, volunteers, and/or inmates and idealization of violence or drug use. Images are particularly compromised as originals are scanned and reviewed before submission, sometimes making the quality second or third generation before placement by the editorial team, enabling the controlling gaze to blur and pixelate what began as clear expression. Too, the SpeakOut! Program has publication guidelines; while we always encourage writers to seek alternative publication venues, we decline submissions that promote values counter to our mission, in some ways aligning with the jail's policy against work featuring physical and gender violence, celebration of substance abuse, and racist or oppressive narratives. Sometimes these depictions are more perceived than they are present. As noted previously, language considered offensive is altered. Whereas a free self-publisher could determine its own degree of censorship, jail writers are still confined to the privileged paradigm of what is "appropriate." As Tobi has argued elsewhere (Jacobi "Against"), this determination acts like a filter, risking complicity with the very system we seek to call into question and complicating our desire to curate spaces for empowerment. The realization of publication for our writers, then, is as evident in the process as in the final product. At each juncture—verbal publication, revision, and various printings (i.e. letters, copies circulated in the housing unit, final journal)—their words come closer to entering and affecting the dominant discourse. For these writers, publication might become the processing of self, a construction and reconstruction that is enabled and mediated by moving censures and boundaries.

Beyond Self-Publication, Toward Civic Engagement

Words on the Wall by Terri C., Spring 2016

> Words on a wall in a program room in the Larimer County Jail
> *"Respect is not demanded*
> *Respect is commanded*
> *By your behavior."*
> Hmmm
> Another rule true for the inhabitants of the jail,
> for the "clients" in the system.
> Almost never true for those cogs whose livelihoods are
> supported by our existence in it.
> Pull the cameras back for enough, and all of the bullies,
> are exposed,
> to any who choose to look.
> So what are all of the cameras everywhere,
> really for?
> Who
> is really after who
> Why?

Recently a booming voice over a hidden loudspeaker in the hall reminded our workshop group (four facilitators and fifteen women) that "inmates are expected to stand single file against the wall." They had been chatting with and hugging a peer who'd recently learned she would be heading to prison later that week as we made our way from the housing unit toward the workshop room. Who are the cameras for? Who is really after whom when we limit how fellow humans can engage with one another in moments of pain or joy or uncertainty? National trends in corrections have shifted toward a more retributive approach under the current administration, though there are indications of collective social justice as courts review and begin to overturn decades-old "life without parole" sentences for juveniles in Pennsylvania and attempt to hold accountable maverick prison officials like Arizona's Joe Arpaio, perhaps shifting the cameras in the ways that Terri C. suggests. The notion of self-publication feels wildly inadequate as a descriptor for the act of making public the work selected and produced by SpeakOut! participants. Meaningful public engagement, whether through workshop participation or publication circulation, lies at the heart of the SpeakOut! mission and, we argue, is a core value of community literacy work's participation in counterdiscourse, what Moussa and Scapp name as "clearing a space in which the formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their desires—to counter the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses" (88). As

program administrators and volunteers (and like so many other community literacy scholar-activists), we have both experienced a deep call to action. The stories of women and men long separated from family and community motivate a strong desire to work actively against damaging stereotypes of incarcerated people. Like those who have sought to engage various publics before us, we aim to partner with local arts and literacy groups to create public spaces and events for interaction, discussion, and debate on the aims of confinement and the possibilities for those held behind bars. In the year to come, our efforts (and we hope those of others in community literacy) will engage the following:

- Sponsoring conversations between jail writers across the globe through tactical exchanges

- Seeking and shifting media coverage through wider, more intentional circulation of jail-born narratives radio

- Advocating social change through performance and presence in public spaces that have not traditionally recognized the value of narratives behind bars or the social, racial, gender, and sexual injustice that shape contemporary carceral practices in the U.S.

Each of these modes of engagement suggests a different conception of what it means to self/publish from jail and to meaningfully shift mainstream narratives of incarceration. Moving from self-publishing as a counterpublic act; or act of desperation; or amateur status, to self-publication as deliberate circulation within and across specific discourse communities enables writers to imagine themselves beyond incarceration and community members to allow these imaginings to come to fruition. Publication of self is not a privilege for those lucky enough to find a seat in a SpeakOut! workshop, but rather a human right, a claim to engaged citizenry in a political climate determined to see incarcerated people rendered as invisible as possible. We hold out hope that the power of an engaged and committed group of teachers and writers will demand space for writers behind bars and then sit down so that writers' voices join a collective demand to be heard beyond the din of mainstream entertainment and diminutive and entrepreneurial news reporting, making the words that emerge from jail more than a-rest, more than a spotlight on individual reform, but rather a call to collective action on issues of social, racial, and gender justice. Until then, at the end of each twelve-week workshop series, we self-publish the wor(l)ds of SpeakOut! writers as they have asked us to do. We strive to embody a deep patience and enact decolonial principles in our university-carceral relationships as Ana Plemons has argued we must (133). We document and circulate the narratives they have selected with as much integrity as we can and as widely as our resources permit. Although we recognize the ways that the carceral and university institutional mandates constrain and even shape the ways that this publication can occur, we remain committed to inviting SpeakOut! writers

to reanimate their sense of identity in ways that have often been eclipsed by those beyond prison walls.

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Tobi Jacobi is Professor of English and director of the Community Literacy Center at Colorado State University. She has coordinated the SpeakOut! Writing Workshop program since its inception in 2005 and is currently working on a prison literacy remix project that blends contemporary pedagogy with archival prison texts.