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**Reading, Writing and Prisoners:
Literature and Prisons in the US Southwest**

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Why Teach in Prisons?

This fall I have been teaching in Florence State Prison, deep in Arizona's southeastern desert. The drive southwards from my home goes through part of the Basin and Range province, hot Sonoran desert flatlands punctuated by the bare reddish granite Sacaton Mountains. Much of the route to the prison traverses the Gila River Indian reservation where the Pima – or Akimel O'odham – people live in a deeply resistant poverty. A new irrigation canal is under construction on the west side of Route 87 and its presence only emphasizes how much human imagination and effort work to transform what have in the past been called wastelands. That phrase 'wastelands' says far more about humans than about the land.

When Arizona built its new state prison in Florence in 1908 it sought a remote location where prisoners could disappear out of most public sight. Florence is the seat of Pinal County, an Arizona county whose major economic presence has become the corrections industry, a euphemistic phrase that emphasizes transformation but delivers very little positive change. In Pinal County there are nine prisons operated by the county, state, and federal governments, along with two large private prisons. These are truer wastelands, human wastelands where the unwanted get consigned for imprisonment or deportation. Arizona's booming prison population has helped the town of Florence grow in its civilian population by at least a third over the last decade. It is an economy driven by social and human failures, by the deserts lying within distant cities, schools, and a violence-saturated culture. The wastelands of education lie in this desert town and its prison inmates.

There are over 10,000 inmates at the Florence and neighboring Eymann state prisons, about a quarter of the 40,000+ prisoners in the Arizona state prison system. Despite their very low education levels, only an approximate tenth of inmates are registered in prison education classes. A legal requirement exists that state prisons provide General Educational Development (GED) education for

inmates who have not completed high school and a few take advantage of these low-level courses. That requirement does not extend to non-citizens so there is no education available for this segment of the prison population, representing about 15 percent and nearly all of whom are Spanish-speakers. A few prisoners with private resources or families to pay tuition take mail correspondence courses from two Arizona community colleges. Otherwise there are no post-secondary education opportunities, a situation that has held since the collapse of most post-secondary prison education programs after the US Congress eliminated Pell Grant funding in 1994.

The strongest tool against recidivism – better education – has drawn the strongest political attacks and these attacks have been successful. Carefully-designed social research has confirmed repeatedly that education has significant effects on re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration. One leading study conducted in Ohio, Minnesota and Maryland found a 29 percent drop in recidivism attributable to prison education. (Steurer) An Arizona study found a 25 percent drop in recidivism due to prison education. (Arizona Department of Corrections 8) Nearly all of this education is catch-up secondary or vocational coursework.

In Arizona prisons today the post-secondary-level teaching that takes place on-site is virtually non-existent and what does exist is voluntary. The major political initiatives today relating to state prisons concern their privatization and expansion, and closing the state Department of Juvenile Corrections in order to transfer juveniles in county jails shared with adult inmates. Prison budgets are protected and are expanding to create another 5,000 beds, but there is little budgetary emphasis on in-prison programming and community support to contend with high recidivism rates. In Arizona more than half of inmates return to prison within six years, mostly for new felony convictions. (Arizona Department of Corrections 3) Over 83 percent of inmates are repeat felony offenders. (Fischer 79) Despite such high rates and the demonstrated effectiveness of prison education, there has been no large-scale and system-wide attempt to open new educational opportunities.

As of fiscal year 2011, the operating budget of the Department of Corrections exceeds that of state financial support for its university system. (Executive Budget Summary 29) While Arizona's education budget continues to face massive cuts, the consequences of poor education – our prison system – continue to expand massively. On the evidence of its state budget alone, Arizona's social priorities remain profoundly skewed. This growth comes despite a crime rate that has consistently dropped. The state's 2009 violent crime rate was lower than in any year since 1976; the property crime rate was lower than at any point since 1966. (Bureau of Justice Statistics) There is no need to engage in arguments about social causality in order to observe that expenditures on prisons compete with expenditures on education, health and social welfare. Unfortunately prisons are winning the competition over schools.

We need to question the poor logic that creates such a competition for social resources. In *Newjack*, his memoir of a year spent as a corrections officer at Sing Sing prison in New York State, Ted Conover (233) records a conversation with an inmate who begins:

“It says here in this article that the government is planning right now for the new prisons they're going to need in ten or twelve years. I got that right?”

Again I nodded.

“That's wrong.”

“What's wrong about planning ahead?”

“Because, dig this. Anyone planning a prison they're not going to build for ten or fifteen years is planning for a child, planning prison for somebody who's a child right now. So you see? They've already given up on that child! They already expect that child to fail. You heard? Now why, if you could keep that from happening, if you could send that child to a good school and help his family stay together—if you could do that, why are you spending that money to put him in jail?”

Conover writes that he had no answer, that the inmate “had made me feel dumb in my uniform, like a bozo carrying out someone else's ill-conceived plan.” This is a question that neither Conover nor any of us should face alone. Where human wastelands are expanding relentlessly in a cycle that thrives on the reproduction of educational failure, then it becomes the challenge of teachers to work against social desertification.

What might be the role of college and university English departments in meeting this sort of challenge? English departments in the United States prefer to believe that decades ago they ceased being genteel retreats and that they have strived to link scholarship with social action. It is true that English departments have swung in the direction of community engagement and have sought to shape public programs to encourage reading and writing. This direction has led to some energetic, innovative, and marvelous programming in which departments and the English profession as a whole should take pride. The work of my ASU colleagues and friends Jim Blasingame in teaching at under-served local schools and Melissa Pritchard in developing creative writing programs for sexually-trafficked women and children – to name only two among many colleagues who contribute their time and energy to such work—deserves the highest respect.

But is it as true that English faculties have worked to create programs for heavily stigmatized populations that include criminal victimizers? It is one matter to create Shakespeare performance festivals for high school students; it is quite another to run a Shakespeare class in prison for inmates serving lengthy sentences for violent crimes. Yet if we have faith in education as a transformative social force and individual experience, how can we avoid the challenge of teaching in prison environments?

Prior to the 1994 elimination of Pell grants throughout the US prison system, there were an estimated 250-300 post-secondary programs in state and federal prisons. Deprived of means of financial support, this rapidly collapsed into a bare handful of programs. A few college- and university-based programs survived with private funding, including such as Boston University's [Prison Education Program](#) and Bard College's [Prison Initiative](#). There has been no systematic national study of post-secondary prison-based education, largely because it has become so scarce. Some community college course offerings to inmates are basically workforce readiness programs that do little more than teach resume-writing and job interviewing. They carry an implicit assumption that inmates are incapable of

more advanced intellectual pursuits, and that they need to adapt to the labor force without questioning its terms or engaging in independent thought.

Are there any signs of thaw in this bleak Ice Age of prison education in the United States? Tobi Jacobi, a Colorado State University faculty member, suggests that the growing community literacy movement has much to contribute to prison education. University-prison programming and bridging courses, she argues, create a reciprocal relationship between students and inmates. She advocates a 'prison writing partnership' (77) as a mode of academic activism for improved literacy and cites a number of new university-prison programs.

Where will the teaching labor come from to expand programming? Most post-secondary prison teaching gets provided on a volunteer basis by community organizations or individual faculty members. English faculty members who teach regularly in prisons tend to be isolated figures, receiving moral support from their departments but absent the context of an organized program. Take one example. Richard Shelton, one of the best-recognized—near legendary—prison teachers in the United States, taught for 30 years in Arizona prisons while holding a distinguished professorship of English at University of Arizona. Although he received occasional assistance from graduate students, for those three decades Shelton remained the only senior faculty member of his department teaching in prisons regularly. Solitary efforts are the norm and speak to the marginalization of prison education within universities and their English departments. Such isolation must give way to a mobilization of shared and collective academic teaching labor.

With nearly 2.3 million inmates in US state and federal prisons at present, their educational marginalization represents a willful, pervasive, and unaffordable ignorance. Instead of engagement, US media culture tends to cycle through phases of fear or dark romanticization of prisons. Films such as *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *The Green Mile* (1999), Russell Crowe's recent *The Next Three Days* (2010) and popular Hollywood-shaped versions of prison are disturbing because cumulatively they

underscore fundamental ignorance. Prisons on film become sites of myth or action entertainment, not an encounter with reality. In reality we fear prisons and loathe their inmates. Yet with the highest incarceration rate in the world, prison inmates are part of America's face that cannot and should not be hidden. We cannot pretend that we do not know these millions of prisoners and ex-prisoners: they are our former, present or future co-workers, neighbors, friends, and family members.

A central justification for the existence of contemporary universities lies in their work to confront social realities and address ignorance; a central rationale for English departments rests in their capacity to deploy language, writing and literature in this task. The combined issues of literacy, literature, learning, absence of post-secondary educational opportunity, and goals of community engagement make a compelling case for university-prison links. Through the rest of this talk I will detail how we created such educational links at the ASU English department.

Creating a Prison Education Program

The ASU prison education program has as its philosophical basis an assertion, one anchored in international law, that education is a human right. Education is a right that inheres within our humanity. It is not a right that stops at a prison's gates or at any time in life. To assert a right, however, is insufficient; it must be exercised. Education needs to traverse borders and boundaries, including prison boundaries.

Arizona State University espouses a social philosophy of community engagement, an effort to reach out from its university campuses in order to achieve beneficial and lasting effects. The prison education program within the ASU English department locates itself squarely within this work of community engagement. In the words of the university's vision statement, "ASU strengthens communities by contributing to community dialogue and responding to communities' needs. We

provide an education that's inclusive rather than exclusive. Our students engage in the world around them.”

This quite small program emerged from educational voluntarism – faculty who give their own time in order to assume additional workload –and a belief that prison education has been treated too long as a pedagogical leper. Voluntarism has its limits but especially during a period of budget cutbacks it is a vital vehicle. While voluntarism is insufficient foundation upon which to contribute meaningfully to meeting the need for post-secondary prison education, the participation of universities can help overcome the stigmatization of such work and push up the effective ceiling of secondary-only education in Arizona prisons. The reputation of universities and university teachers goes a long way inside prisons.

It is crucial to form a university-based support community around prison education work in order to assure its sustained future. The first step toward creating a program was to identify interested members of the ASU campus community, which happened by creating a Prison Literature and Writing Group with an online site. Prison teaching, writing and literature studies should not be lone-wolf or temporary endeavors, but rather a consistent, organized, and sustainable pursuit with roots in and support from university communities. There are at present twenty graduate student and faculty members of the Prison Literature and Writing Group, two faculty members currently teaching in the area, and several more faculty interested in prison-related teaching. Most important, we have good and growing partnerships with the New Mexico Corrections Department and the Arizona Department of Corrections based on demonstrated capacity to contribute.

English 345: Prison Literature

The first course developed was a special topics online course, English 345: Prison Literature, an introduction to selected US prison literature. While it is tempting to expand the syllabus of this course to global prison literature – there is a significant body of literature by imprisoned Nobel Prize winners,

for example – it is preferable that US students engage initially with an American canon of prison literature that extends to the seventeenth century. This is a rich field, one that extends from textual moments such as Hawthorne’s opening “Prison Door” chapter in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) to major recent novels such as John Cheever’s *Falconer* (1977), which emerged from his work as a writing teacher at Sing Sing prison.

English 345 considers prison literature as an integral part of US literary and rhetorical history; as a vehicle for civil disobedience; as an exploration of socially invisible worlds; as resistant autobiography; and as a genre model for US social self-comprehension. Course readings include Henry David Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ and Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ as exemplars of imprisonment for moral conscience; Piri Thomas’ now-classic *Down These Mean Streets* (1964) and Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand* (2001), both autobiographies of lives outside and in prison; and the autobiography of executed Los Angeles gang leader Stanley ‘Tookie’ Williams, *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* (2007). Reading Tookie Williams together with the seventeenth and eighteenth-century execution sermons of New England clerics Increase Mather and Samson Occum creates an understanding that themes of redemption in twenty-first century ‘gangsta lit’ have an enduring presence in American literature. The goal of this course is to provide students with a brief tour of prison literature, its contemporary presence, and critical ideas about the intersection of incarceration and literature.

As this course and others develop, we are paying increasing attention to Southwestern writers who have established an outsized presence in US prison literature. These writers include Jimmy Santiago Baca, a poet, novelist and memoirist who emerged from years of solitary confinement in Arizona and New Mexico prisons; Ken Lamberton, a former biology teacher who spent 12 years in prison for an affair with a 14 year-old student and whose books of nature writing have won great praise, including *Wilderness and Razor Wire* (1999) that gained the Burroughs Prize; and Richard Shelton’s

Crossing the Yard (2007), a compelling memoir of his thirty years as a writing teacher in Arizona prisons.

We are also engaging more explicitly with the issues of imprisoned women writers, using Judith

Scheffler's *Wall Tappings* (2002) anthology of women's prison writings from 200AD to the present.

English 345 will continue to develop in its online version and may at some point become an in-class course.

English 484: The Pen Project

The second course, English 484: The Pen Project, is a university-prison community internship. This one-semester internship course employs a Blackboard course management platform as a digital bridge to link inmate-writers in New Mexico with Arizona undergraduates who provide critiques of inmate-produced poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction prose. The internship is a graded, supervised online internship organized in cooperation with the New Mexico Corrections Department. Interns in this project employ the critical skills they have learned over the course of their undergraduate education in order to read and critically comment upon the writing – fiction, poetry, non-fiction prose – produced primarily by maximum-security inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

Our project goals are:

- Employ English-language literature and creative writing as a positive rehabilitative force in prisons.
- Use online educational technology to create a university-prisons partnership for educating both inmates and interns.
- Support educational service to maximum-security prisoners who otherwise have no education opportunities.
- Support prison education officers through internships that can enable them to run prison writing programs.
- Educate advanced undergraduate students on social issues of incarceration and prison education.

The project work cycle begins when prison staff posts scan hardcopy writings submitted by inmates. Interns then comment on these writings and post their comments on the Blackboard site.

Afterwards prison staff download and print out intern comments for inmates to read. One semester

has six two-week critique cycles. Work done by the interns supports editing and production of *Enchanted Mirror*, the penitentiary's literary magazine.

During the past semester eleven interns coached 90 inmates in writing. Most of these prisoners are in maximum-security units, are under lock-down 23 hours per day, and have no access to regular education programming. The individualized writing coaching that interns provide represents education delivered direct to prisoners in their cells. Interns provide a depth and intensity of educational attention that the prison staff could never provide with its limited resources. For security reasons, identities of both inmates and interns remain anonymous. Interns function under strictly-enforced security protocols.

The course has proved very popular. We advertised the course and received 38 initial applications, from which we interviewed 15 applicants and selected 11 interns. Before the internship began there was a weekend training session in critical practice. As a typical example of the work involved, an inmate submits a half-to-one-page handwritten poem. An intern writes 3-5 single-spaced pages of comment in response. Each intern handles 2-3 submissions per two-week cycle. In addition interns hold online discussions about major recent texts on prison culture; do response-writing to literacy, rhetoric, and teacher pedagogy theories; track their own progress and reflections through weekly journaling; and compile a final course portfolio.

The interns emerged as a highly-motivated and self-coordinated force in their own right. Although this is an online course, the interns requested and received physical class meetings, organized a reference book drive, and organized a campus Prison Education Club. Students are both repeating the internship and applying to become teaching interns in English 584 at Florence State Prison, where they receive enrollment preference for a limited number of internships. Several students appear to have found a vocational calling in prison education.

The ASU English department has adopted English 484: The Pen Project as a regular offering. It made the course part of the regular teaching load of one of the two co-instructors. Michelle Ribeiro, acting director of education at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, reports that the New Mexico Corrections Department administration is very satisfied and has heard favorable legislative oversight comment that this is innovation without a budget demand.

English 484: The Pen Project is unique. To our current knowledge there is no other writing project in the United States that links a university and a prison, specifically maximum security, as partners via online technology. This project represents a model for development and expansion, especially given the dwindling budget allocations for education in state prison systems.

For its interns, this course has been transformative. In the voice of one intern, "I don't think anyone came into this course assuming this would become their life's work; but I feel like I will leave this internship feeling that this will be my life's work. ... I don't think this is just a great opportunity; I feel that it's vital." Writing an evaluation for the prisoners to read, another intern wrote poignantly:

I walked into this experience thinking that I would be putting my skills as an English Literature major to good use, and I did, but reading and commenting on your work has really been an exercise in humanity for me. Your writing makes it clear that people are all people and we all have something to teach each other, and that it's important to listen inside of the prison system and understand what it's like from your human perspective as an inmate. I feel as though you were the primary instructors in this project and I am the one who learned the most, although I hope I have helped you all, too. This opportunity was once in a lifetime for me.

And one final sample from out of an overpowering set of student evaluations:

For me, your writing is evidence of hope. That education can happen in constrained circumstances and that the will of people to communicate cannot be diminished. I feel that in order to make the society we live in more just, more peaceful, and more equal than it is now, we will need your voices. I came to this project with the belief that every person has the right to education and I am walking away from it certain, that even more than that every person has the right to expression and that as a culture we will need those expressions.

As an instructor with twenty years of teaching experience, I can state simply that no other class I have taught has moved me with such deep, positive and satisfying emotion.

English 584: Teaching at Florence State Prison

Our third course, an English 584 graduate-level internship, will begin in January 2011. It consists of three courses taught once a week in the minimum-security North Yard at Florence State Prison. Two interns will team-teach a course in Shakespeare; another two will team-teach a creative writing course; and I will continue teaching an American literature course. There are 1400 inmates on the North Yard and class sizes will be up to 16 students, so this is only a very small contribution toward filling massive educational needs.

I have begun preparatory teaching at the prison yard. On this November day teaching at Florence the class takes a midway break during our two-hour session. The inmates have to stay close to the temporary structure that houses the education program. There may be an inmate count and they will be held accountable for not being present.

Security has been raised since there was an assault earlier in the week on a prisoner who managed to gain access to this yard from another one. He was found in the showers with multiple skull fractures and remains in a coma. Such assaults usually involve either money or sex. Now there are regular and frequent checks on everyone in the yard. Earlier there had been a radio call in which I thought I heard my name. It was a Code 4, meaning a personnel safety check. I was in the middle of teaching and did not respond. "If that was for me, what happens if I don't respond?" I ask. "Don't worry," says one inmate, "They'll find you and fast." Sure enough, within five minutes an officer walks through the door to check. I am not in the habit of making radio calls while in the middle of teaching a

class where I have to keep mental focus on the discussion. These are pedagogical issues that I am encountering for the first time.

A few minutes into the break I join the inmates outside to enjoy the winter sun. One inmate mentions his girlfriend at ASU who will be graduating next month. "It took her five years. The extra year was due to dealing with my craziness." I normally do not ask background questions but I wonder how long she will wait and whether he will be out in time to enjoy her company. "How long do you have?" I ask. "This is my fourth year and I got an eight-year sentence," he answers. I mentally wish him good luck with his lover. It occurs to me that one reason he may be in the class is to be able to tell her that he is studying English literature in an ASU-organized course and so share her educational pursuit in some small measure. The romantic in me hopes so, although the realist in me wonders if she is still his girlfriend or if this is wishful speech.

Back in class we deal with three stories: Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' James' 'The Real Thing,' and London's 'To Build a Fire.' The students like the Poe and London readings; they dislike and mostly did not read the James story. Good for them: James is a mental colonialist who seeks to dictate his readers' thoughts. There is enough of that practiced in prison. The students discuss Poe and London very closely and exhibit a command of reading detail, from the old man's eye in 'Tell-Tale Heart' to a close comparison of the man and dog in 'To Build a Fire.' During discussion of London when a class member notices a line that provides an entry into the author's race-thought, I inform them of London's white supremacist beliefs and disparage his racism. The one Latino student who sits quietly at the back of the class slips into a neutral, disengaged face.

I keep the students away from writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Sarah Orne Jewett. No antiquated language or stories that call for Henry James-like sensibilities. Learning to gauge reading interests is crucial. For next class I assign Bret Harte's 'The Luck of Roaring Camp,' Mark Twain's 'The Private History of a Campaign that Failed,' Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at

Owl Creek Bridge,' and Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers.' Each story deals with an instance of violence, whether natural or human. Before the class ends we choose a couple novels for next semester. Out of a list of recommendations I provide, they choose Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*, Edgar Allen Poe's *The Gold-Bug and Other Stories*, and Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Adventure and horror/mystery novels and stories appear to be the preferred sub-genres.

The education officer who can overhear this class from his office comments later "If they choose *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* only as third, they don't know what they are missing!" Possibly true, but part of the joy of reading literature is making these discoveries. Part of the comfort of reading is that it transports us into imagination, into an escape. In prison, reading literature and writing can become a pathway towards both imagining and creating another and better life.

We reach a concluding question: why should university faculty help open such pathways? In 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a talk at Harvard University, what became his acclaimed essay 'The American Scholar.' Emerson found an auspicious sign, he said, in American literature because "the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near, the low, the common, was explored and poetized... The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time." For Emerson, to be a scholar was to engage with everyday life: "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low" he wrote. The low and the familiar today are our prisons. These are an inescapable topic of our own time, one where universities and their scholars have a distinct contribution to make. To engage with prisoners and prison education is to work to become the scholars we hope to be.

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