

Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out, edited by Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. 250 pp.

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When we discuss the problems of materiality in the classroom, we often ask about the outside forces that impede students' lives and how those forces impact their writing. With writing workshops in women's prisons, however, the impeding force is inherently "inside." The walls of the classroom are the same walls that keep the women—the incarcerated—bound to rules designed to undermine what we traditionally ask writers to value: that is, the processes of discovering one's own voice, of recognizing and challenging cultural codes, of expressing one's self to an audience and of making one's self heard. Conversely, these values pose a threat to the control prisons exert over the bodies and minds of the incarcerated, which prisons try to undermine them at all costs. As a former criminal defense attorney, my interactions with the incarcerated did little to subvert that system of control. While I encouraged my clients to write to me and develop their stories, I had a specific agenda: I needed the facts that would work in their favor at trial or feed into a plea bargain. I did not ask them what they wanted to write. I did not ask them to challenge the system that incarcerated them. In fact, I strongly encouraged them against it. But now, as an MFA student designing curricula for prison writing workshops, I strive to understand the issues of materiality in carceral spaces that shape and limit writerly opportunities. What is the value of writing for women in prison? How can we create a public space for exploring tensions between communities and discourses in lockdown? How can we create ethical prison writing programs that foremost benefit writers? For me as a reader, Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford's edited collection *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars, and Writers Speak Out* is successful because it develops a flexible framework educators can use to answer these tough questions.

While several collections of incarcerated women's writing have been published to acclaim, including Gayle Bell Chevigny's *Doing Time*, Jeff Evans' *Undoing Time*, Wally Lamb's *Couldn't Keep It to Myself*, and Jodie Lawston and Ashley Lucas's *Razor Wire Women*, this collection focuses on teaching writing in women's prisons and jails. Jacobi, a professor of composition and literacy studies at Colorado State University, and Folwell Stanford, a professor of interdisciplinary and literary studies at DePaul University, have many years of experience teaching in traditional and not-so-traditional classrooms. As Stanford writes in the introduction, they set out to achieve three goals with

this collection: to draw attention to the writing of incarcerated women; to challenge public stereotypes through the interplay of writing by incarcerated women and workshop facilitators; and finally to “interrogat[e] romantic notions of the writing teacher [. . .] as transformative agent or savior” (3).

The collection’s contributors largely succeed in these aims. Essays, letters, memoirs and poems from currently and formerly incarcerated women focus on the transformative act of writing in the confines of prison, poignantly representing incarcerated writers as individuals of value. Jacobi and Folwell Stanford supplement participants’ contributions with essays by program facilitators that detail different approaches to prison writing workshops, whether such programs are delivered in person or through correspondence. Most of the facilitators’ essays acknowledge the divide between the white, heterosexual, middle class academics who tend to organize these workshops and the incarcerated women participating in them, who are far more likely to be of color, queer, and from working- and poverty-class backgrounds. On top of recognizing the concrete division between incarcerated and free, the facilitators who contribute to the collection universally find that acknowledging race, sexual orientation, and class divides is vital to ensuring workshops are spaces for participants to explore and make public their own voices—not the voices of authority figures running the prison or even the prison writing program.

The collection is divided into three sections: Writing and Reclaiming Self, Bridging Communities: Writing Programs and Social Practice, and Writing, Resistance, and the Material Realities of U.S. Prisons and Jails. Though there is significant interplay among these sections, it is instructive to view them as separate entities. The first focuses on the identification and reclamation of voice while incarcerated. As Stanford discusses in her introduction, a majority of incarcerated women have a history of mental illness, and at least half have suffered abuse (6). Each of these struggles can have a silencing effect on the incarcerated, but in concert, the silence such women experience is deafening. Writing allows incarcerated women to reclaim their voices and reconnect with a world outside of prison walls. Contributors Jessica Hill, Nancy Birkla, and Shelley Goldman find different connections between the words and art of their childhood to the writing that saw them through their imprisonments, revealing and then solidifying their identities as writers outside of their incarceration. The innate power of words is further established in Dionna Griffin’s powerful recollection of her sentencing in “This Ain’t No Holiday Inn, Griffin’: Finding Freedom on the Blank Page,” where she ruminates on how the word “guilty” transformed her life. She found herself powerless both inside the beautiful Art Deco courthouse of her sentencing and in the dank stale county jail—until, that is, she could secure legal pads, pencils, and stamps to carry her writing to the outside world. Words incarcerated her, but words also set her free.

Section two shifts the focus from individual voice to the creation of space for that voice, providing frameworks for facilitators to develop and evaluate writing workshops. In “‘Good Intentions Aside’: The Ethics of Reciprocity in a University-Jail Women’s Writing Workshop Collaboration,” Sadie Reynolds, founder of the Inside Out Writing Project and formerly incarcerated herself, recommends not building a program based on the idea that the participants are in any way deficient or in need of rehabilitation or charity. Instead, she argues that a program built on solidarity between facilitators and incarcerated women will benefit all, pushing facilitators to struggle against the system and not just acquiesce inside its walls. In a different vein, educators Tom Kerr, in “Incorporeal Transformations: Audience and Women Writing in Prison,” and Wendy W. Hinshaw and Kathie Klarreich, in “Writing Exchanges: Composing Across Prison and University Classrooms,” detail the tensions and benefits of connecting incarcerated women with an outside audience of undergraduate and graduate students. There is a slight strain between Reynolds’s essay and the latter two pieces, which highlight the benefits college students receive from participating in these programs. Reynolds would likely categorize these benefits as being of little use to the incarcerated participants and therefore a poor focus for facilitators, much as she would find distasteful the concessions that must often be made in the name of access to prison writing programs (103-104). However, student benefits may be a necessary selling point to the educational institutions involved.

While incarcerated women’s voices appear throughout the facilitators’ essays, oftentimes commenting on the nature of the workshop or writing exchange, for me one weakness of this section is the absence of incarcerated participants’ responses to and evaluations of workshop formats and structures. The letters and thoughts on the matter in “Writing Exchanges” and “Incorporeal Transformations,” no matter how faithfully executed, are all offered by facilitators alone. An extended reflection from an incarcerated woman on the workshop experience would be a valuable addition for the next edition of this collection, or future ones like it.

In the final section, contributors explore the political and social impact of writers’ voices coming out of prison workshops. Incarcerated writers face immediate and potentially permanently damaging retributions for their words, yet despite risks, they continue writing. Boudicca Burning, who helped other women draft legal claims while incarcerated, uses her piece, “I am Antarctica: I Shriek, I Accuse, I Write,” to juxtapose the power her words have as a jailhouse law clerk with the powerlessness she felt after being forced to lie to her family about the treatment she received in prison. Further, one of the most memorable pieces in the collection, Velmarine O. Szabo’s “‘You Just Threatened My Life’: Struggling to Write and Remember in Prison,” interweaves memoir from her

childhood with a description of the retaliation she faced in prison because of her self-expression. The horrifying abuse Szabo suffered as a child is echoed in the attempts a guard makes to punish her for expressing herself through writing. In each case, the accuser distorts the truth to justify the subsequent abuse, but in neither is justification for such punishment anything but erroneous and unimaginable.

Again, three questions echo throughout the collection: what is the inherent value of writing, how can facilitators find ethical ways to support prison writing efforts, and how can those efforts engender agency for women in prison? As contributors grapple to answer these questions, they provide essential lessons for anyone interested in supporting writers in prison. While prison workshops will never transform institutional walls into writing utopias, Jacobi and Folwell Stanford's collection demonstrates that important work and incredible writing can thrive in even the most difficult spaces.

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Works Cited

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