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Turning Silence into Speech and Action: Prison Activism and the Pedagogy of Empowered Citizenship

Stephen John Hartnett, Jennifer K. Wood & Bryan J. McCann

Based on almost 50 years of combined experience as prison activists and prison teachers, the authors offer three case studies of prison activism and pedagogy in action. The first case study, by Hartnett, details the "artistry of agency" as enacted in poetry workshops in prison and in public poetry events, thus illustrating artistic communication. The second, by Wood, examines how friendship becomes political in the epistolary communication between free and imprisoned correspondents, thus addressing interpersonal communication. The third, by McCann, addresses web-based communication as a tool for advocacy for condemned prisoner/activists on Texas's death row, and hence political communication. Taken as a whole, the three case studies celebrate different communication strategies as avenues of enlightenment and empowerment while offering powerful arguments for abolishing the prison–industrial complex.

Keywords: Prison Activism; Prison Pedagogy; Empowered Citizenship; Social Justice; Prison–Industrial Complex

In August 2009, a Federal Court-ordered panel found that California's correctional system is "in a tailspin." Clocking in with an annual $10.3 billion budget, employing

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over 69,000 personnel, and housing over 160,000 prisoners, the California Department of Corrections is the United States' largest and most dangerously flawed prison system. The court found that the medical and mental health care available to California's prisoners was "unconstitutionally inadequate"; that overcrowding was so extreme it created "conditions of extreme peril"; that the state housed prisoners in "appalling conditions"; and that the system's administration was in a state of "utter disarray." The report chronicles heart-breaking incompetence lurching toward horror. To begin rectifying these "appalling conditions," the court made a bold ruling: that California must redress its crammed prison population by releasing roughly 40,000 prisoners.[1] To help achieve this goal, the report argued that the state should try to lower the prison population by cutting the recidivism rate by increasing prisoners' access to educational, artistic, and vocational programs. The claim that such rehabilitative offerings lower the recidivism rate is backed, the court noted, by "overwhelming and uncontroverted evidence."[2]

Expanding upon these findings regarding California, we argue in this essay that the US prison system is a disaster, that harsher punishment cannot create public safety, and that offering more artistic and educational alternatives to prisoners is a proven means of reducing crime. Moreover, we contend such pedagogical efforts not only reduce crime, but also enhance the health of our democracy by creating spaces for our criminalized neighbors to begin addressing the harm they have caused, to learn how and why to participate in civil society, and hence to begin the long journey toward full citizenship. We therefore follow the lead of Audre Lorde, who observed that "what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood. [I have come to believe that] the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect." As communication scholars and public citizens, we want to celebrate what Lorde called "the transformation of silence into language and action"[3] while arguing that such transformations benefit all of us, not just the empowered speaker or writer, by functioning as testimonials on the horrors of incarceration and the possibilities of redemption. To pursue this argument, this essay offers three case studies of prison activism: the first explores teaching poetry and public speaking in prisons and then bringing that work into the public as a form of artistic communication; the second examines letter writing and the opportunities and challenges of interpersonal communication; the third discusses using the Internet to engage in anti-death-penalty work, and hence political communication. While the three sections address different genres of communication and activism, they all celebrate prison-based attempts to turn silence into language and action, and they all rotate around what we hereafter call the pedagogy of empowered citizenship.[4]

We should note that the pedagogical methods and communicative strategies documented in this essay are subject to criticism. For some activist-scholars in the prison-abolitionist movement, participants in prison education programs are complicit in sustaining the system they hope to one day abolish. Accordingly, this essay also functions as a contribution to a vibrant discussion regarding the possible forms of resistance against the prison–industrial complex. Dylan Rodríguez, one of the most outspoken critics of the emancipatory potential of prison pedagogy, argues

that "at the site of the prison school (as well as other prison philanthropic ventures) is the mandate of state violence to repress, expel, or liquidate those prisoners who might use the power of knowledge as a 'power for evil.'"[5] Rather than enhancing the capacity of the incarcerated to pursue new means of empowered citizenship, Rodríguez argues such prison-based classrooms reproduce repression and can even lead to the mass-violence implied by the provocative verb "liquidate." Writing in a more measured voice, Joy James urges a firm line between "political" prisoners or "imprisoned intellectuals" who, from their cells, comment on "social meaning, discord, development, ethics, and justice," and less vocal prisoners, who have been crushed by incarceration.[6] Prominent examples of the former camp include Assata Shakur and Leonard Peltier, whose supporters claim were framed for their political activism, and George Jackson and Malcolm X, who became radicalized after their incarcerations. Scholars Michael Hames-García and Barbara Harlow argue that the written works of these prisoner activists are vital resources for analyzing the political-economy of incarceration in America and for imagining new possibilities for justice in our carceral society.[7] For these authors, the political imperative for the abolitionist movement is to follow the lead of incarcerated radicals in building a revolutionary anti-prison agenda. From this perspective, the kinds of prisoner pedagogy supported by the federal judges cited above may be a canard, for in the name of justice they may institutionalize reformist impulses that dilute the revolutionary potential of prisoner activists.

As scholars, teachers, and activists with over 50 years of combined experience of working both in and against prisons, we are deeply sensitive to the fact that prison pedagogy and activism occupy ambivalent spaces vis-à-vis the prison system. Indeed, while we disagree over some points with the authors cited above, the questions they raise haunt our scholarship, teaching, and activism. Still, we are not persuaded by any line of analysis that posits a false dilemma between prison abolition and complicit reform.[8] Rather, we agree with Henry Giroux's observation that resistant pedagogy must be rooted in the lived experiences of those populations most directly affected by the structures of inequality.[9] Thus, whereas Rodríguez, James, and others emphasize the powerful work of a militant minority, we, in an attempt to situate our efforts alongside the daily needs and experiences of our incarcerated students, allies, and friends, believe prison abolitionists could adopt a broader notion of what counts as political engagement. By seeking emancipatory content in the less forthrightly political sectors of imprisonment alongside those more potent insurrectionary acts, we believe prison scholars and activists can arrive at a richer, more nuanced perspective on the relationships between imprisonment and agency. Such an approach will, more often than not, take forms that are routine, even banal, in character. Our claim, then, is that the sites of intervention described in this essay offer inroads toward empowered citizenship and activism. Indeed, following Hames-García's proposition that imprisoned authors are "valuable and concrete theorists of justice,"[10] we believe the incarcerated poetry student, the pen-pal lifer, and the insubordinate death-row prisoner all offer insights into the violence of incarceration and the inspiring possibilities of renewal and citizenship. Thus, while we share our

colleagues' concerns about the power of the prison–industrial complex to co-opt our pedagogical efforts, we nonetheless offer our three case studies as attempts to illuminate new pathways to empowerment and, ultimately, social change.

Furthermore, experience teaches us that the tensions inherent in prison pedagogy offer remarkable opportunities for personal reflection and collective invention. For example, Eleanor Novek offers the following meditation on the "devil's bargain" of publishing a prisoner newspaper in a women's prison in New Jersey: "Inmates who write for such publications may appear to embrace the prison administration's ideology, but they also manage to disseminate important truths about prison life to their readers and create a sense of community for themselves."[11] In that same vein, the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) is based on the assumption that while its members work inside prisons, and are beholden to prison rules, their task is to "witness and speak their experience and knowledge to the public," and hence to "demystify prisons, prisoners, prisoner families and communities, and the economic forces behind American punishment."[12] Like Novek, PCAP, and the many other scholars, activists, and groups we draw upon herein, we do not presume to offer easy answers in the case studies below; to the contrary, this essay represents an imperfect attempt to reckon with our own relationships to the incarcerated and the prison system as a whole. We offer suggestions, not answers, yet we are convinced that none of our hands are clean, and so we make no claims of certitude.

We will close this introduction by noting that mass incarceration is a matter of urgent concern to communication and cultural studies scholars. In 2008, the Pew Center on the States found that more than 2.3 million, or 1-in-99 American adults, are behind bars; the report stresses that this staggering figure is the result of policy choices made over the past three decades, not the product of increased crime.[13] On average, states spend nearly $24,000 per inmate each year,[14] meaning our addiction to mass incarceration is costing billions of tax dollars that could be spent on other social programs that enhance rather than destroy democratic governance. Moreover, most of those prisoners who return to their communities are functionally stripped of their citizenship, as they are often unable to vote and almost universally undesirable to potential employers, hence suffering the dual fate of both electoral and "labor disenfranchisement."[15] At the same time—and here is the key connection for communication and cultural studies scholars—the situations described here have been blanketed in discourses flush with the worst stereotypes regarding race, gender, and socio-economic status, thus rationalizing harsh and ill-advised penal policies while entrenching the language and imagery of inequality, disregard, and cynicism.[16] As these patterns of crime and prison-influenced communication persist and deepen, we have witnessed the production of a terrifying counter-democratic language, one wherein vengeance and dehumanization have become driving forces of the nation, thus creating what one award-winning book has called a "punishing democracy."[17] Given the significance of these crises, we believe that as citizens, educators, and critics, we bear an ethical obligation to confront the prison–industrial complex by engaging the voices of those who experience its wrath.

The Artistry of Agency: Prison Pedagogy and Artistic Communication (Hartnett)

For the past 22 years I have ventured into America's prisons and jails to teach public speaking, creative writing, and other college-level classes. For 15 years, I have explored various ways of incorporating my traditional, on-campus students into my prison classes, asking these students to serve as reading tutors, study mentors, writing and speaking coaches, or simple classmates—what I call "learning partners." In this capacity, we all go to prison together hoping that our sessions offer our imprisoned collaborators something of use, in terms of their learning or their existential condition. No matter the topic, and no matter what titles we bestow upon ourselves, we all receive back as much as we give, and we all learn together: prisoners, traditional students, professors, we all stand shoulder-to-shoulder, hoping to write a poem or deliver a speech, or just to make some meaningful connection. Here are six lessons I have learned from this work:

Communication Can Save Your Life

Coming largely from places full of addiction, abuse, neglect, and anger, and hailing almost universally from broken families, busted up hopes, and crushing poverty, the men and women with whom I interact in prisons often preface their presentations with comments like "this is the first poem I have ever written" or "this is the first speech I have ever given." These incarcerated students almost always note, during post-performance Q&A sessions, that crafting their work has left them glowing with a new sense of purpose and possibility—they love learning and they cherish the opportunity to be heard. What I am calling the "artistry of agency" entails building, supporting, and expanding spaces where prisoners can begin to envision different lives for themselves, literally new ways of being empowered agents. As Mumia Abu-Jamal writes in the preface to the 2002 version of *Live from Death Row*, a book he wrote while awaiting execution for a crime many of us believe he did not commit, "under those darkest of days, under a death warrant. . . your simple act of reading this forbidden book [the original, 1995 version] fed my soul."[18] Knowing we were reading him kept Abu-Jamal going; writing was his lifeline to hope. Likewise, in *Jailbirds*, a low-budget documentary I made with Jon Rutter about the Indiana prison system, Billy Mason told us that participating in the prison debate program Rutter organized had "saved my life."[19] Whereas many of our traditional on-campus students seem to take the privilege of attending college for granted, Abu-Jamal, Mason, and my imprisoned students talk instead about education and art saving their lives—for these imprisoned learners, the stakes are high, the challenges daunting, the rewards almost immeasurable. The artistry of agency, then, means using the teaching of writing and public speaking to men and women who have spent their lives feeling silenced, or ignored, or incapable of self-expression, as a vehicle for helping them to envision themselves not only as better writers and communicators, but also as empowered citizens, as eloquent agents of change.[20]

Make It Public

What happens in the classroom, while inherently valuable and meaningful, also needs to be extended out into the community. This is why I publish *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, a biannual magazine of prisoners' writings, because I want my incarcerated students to be able to think of themselves as members of the world, as engaged citizens with public voices.[21] At the beginning of each workshop, we target these public moments as one of our goals: we are not just writing poems, stories, letters, or memoirs, but drafting political statements intended for public consideration. I promise my students that if they make their best efforts as writers, and then again as team editors and magazine compilers, then I and our "learning partners" will distribute their work to local churches, coffee shops, book stores, hipster hangouts, homeless shelters, and so on. Moreover, by putting the magazine on the web, we ask our imprisoned co-creators to think of themselves as global citizens, as authors whose words mingle in the international space of infinite linking. More than just a poetry magazine, *Captured Words* therefore aspires to fill the role of what Buzz Alexander calls "public scholarship," wherein participants can practice the roles of citizenship while contributing to "the common good."[22] By celebrating the release of each new issue with a public event—a reading, a film screening, a panel discussion, or a dance party—I have tried to create spaces where audiences who have been taught to think of prisoners as illiterate hoodlums and walking time-bombs instead encounter heart-breaking stories of love lost and found, of dreams broken and reclaimed, of promises for better futures and dreams of new lives. In sum, what we do in the workshop or the classroom is not enough: we must take that work and make it public, meaning that those of us who work in prisons are not only educators but also publicists and advocates. We do not speak for our imprisoned students; rather, we help them to find their own voices and then we create public occasions for those voices to sing.[23]

Who Are You?

Working in prisons means encountering shattered children as young as 17 and resigned grandparents in their 60s; it means working with men and women representing many races and religions; it means teaching students from diverse employment and educational backgrounds; it means interacting with the mentally unstable, the politically paranoid, the chronically angry, and the religiously deluded; whether working in women's or men's facilities, it means building community with students who have been raped and both mentally and physically abused—and so teaching in prison takes you into a kaleidoscopic world of difference and pain. Despite their hardships, students come to class eager to learn and (sometimes) hopeful about their futures; encountering that kind of tenacity means entering prisons to teach also entails walking into a world of wonder. Working with the students who populate my prison workshops is therefore both thrilling and terrifying, for it challenges me to confront my own assumptions and prejudices even as I strive to help them address their pasts, change their presents, and author new futures.

This shuttling from pain to empowerment—for imprisoned students, learning partners, and me—requires that we all make ourselves vulnerable: we must be open about our lives and willing to look at them squarely. Sometimes this process of self- and other-evaluation comes in the form of a challenge. For example, in *Disguised as a Poem*, Judith Tannenbaum's memoir about teaching poetry in San Quentin Prison, she tells the story of how she was confronted by a student who shouted at her "Who are you? Why are you here?"[24]

That is a good question. Tannenbaum's initial reaction was defensive, but as she pondered the question, she realized that she had been offered the gift of reflection, for she was being asked by her students to work with them to answer some of life's big questions: Why are you here? What is your purpose? How will you carry yourself on this day? Once she moved past her aggrieved sense of challenged authority, the question became an opportunity; her answer, developed over years of work in prisons, was that she would pledge "to give up willful pretense, and to live an unmasked life of surrender"—she chose to be authentic, raw, an open book.[25] In making this choice, Tannenbaum moved from being a teacher with all the answers to a fellow student walking the long road toward solidarity. When I use the phrase "the artistry of agency," then, I want to be clear that I am not simply bestowing some finished gift upon the imprisoned men and women in our workshops; rather, we are co-creating that space of artistry and agency together, in part by humbly probing the question each week: *Who are you? Why are you here?*[26]

Bearing Witness

I run my prison workshops with on-campus students who, in conjunction with my class on "Communication, Prisons, and Social Justice," go to the prison with me each week. The obvious material differences between the life conditions of imprisoned and "free" participants cannot be overlooked, yet, as much as possible, our "learning partners" function as equal members of the workshop. One of the real joys of this process is watching the students who go to jail with me become ambassadors back to the campus and community, where they inevitably become advocates for the imprisoned men and women they have come to know and respect. Driven by what they have seen in the prison, these students write stories for local newspapers and blogs; they host events; they testify in class; they quickly become not only better poets and public speakers, but also, excited and tireless activists—going to prison fills them with purpose, it energizes them to bear witness to what they have experienced. I work in the prisons, then, not only as a form of empowering pedagogy and activism, and not only as a form of existential challenge, but also as a way of changing the functions of the university itself. First at the University of California, then at Illinois, and now at the University of Colorado Denver, it is understood that my students go to jail, they host arts festivals and poetry slams, they are engaged and they are passionate and they are going to change the world—this is no longer cause for comment, it is just what they do.[27]

"I Spy Divinity" and Reclaiming the Beautiful

Prisons are places of mass-produced misery and ugliness, but then so is much of our culture as a whole—and so we, the free and the imprisoned, can sometimes let ourselves slip into states of sanctioned blindness. In contrast to becoming comfortably numb, writing poetry can be a way to look and listen more carefully, hence becoming a witness to each day's small miracles. For example, when asked about his goals regarding writing poems in prison, Big Ern said, "My task is to transform the world, to make the gross and the shameful into things of beauty and ascension. I spy divinity."[28] In that same vein, in "I Look for Beauty," one imprisoned author wrote: "When nothing goes my way and I feel so full of shame/ because, while free, I acted like life was a game,/ I look for beauty."[29] For this poet, turning toward life's little moments of beauty involved her taking responsibility for making bad decisions while free; then, in learning to spy divinity, she pledged not to take life for granted anymore. For Big Ern and this poet, taking the time to turn away from the pain and drudgery of prison life to try to "spy [the] divinity" of daily life created a space for reflection and appreciation, hence offering them a sense of solace and purpose for carrying on.[30]

"It's All Fucked Up"

Thus far I have tried to portray the hopeful side of teaching in prisons, but I should also be clear that to spend time in such facilities, whether making art or teaching public speaking, means immersing yourself in Hell, for prisons are places of poverty, racism, physical and mental illness, perpetual frustration, and sexual deprivation and depravity—when you go to prison, you encounter a world of pain. In the summer of 2010, while signing in, emptying our pockets, and shuffling through the X-ray machine, the desk guard, a perfectly pleasant old man, big bellied, somebody's granddad, asked, "Those dipshits learnin' anything?" It is like that: casual dehumanization, off-hand denunciations, daily slanders. This is why my students are quick, when not spying divinity, to catalogue the ways they feel cheated by life and abused by the prison system. For some imprisoned poets that means confronting the numbing banality of everyday life in prison—all that bad food and meanness, the lousy light, the sheer boring wretchedness of it all. For others, that means thinking long and hard about the people who led them down the wrong path in life, and confronting the barbarism and betrayal of gang life. For still others, it means tackling addictions. For almost every male writer I have worked with, that means working through angry thoughts about former wives, lovers, or long-lost mothers. For my students at the Denver Women's Correctional Facility, it entails thinking about lives of mental and physical abuse at the hands of rotten men and especially about the babies they left on the outside. As one imprisoned writer/student noted in a poem about living with and amidst so much pain, "it's all fucked up."[31]

To create a space for imprisoned students to express their pain therefore strikes me as a necessary step toward reclaiming their lives; especially for writers who have

achieved higher stages of self-reflexivity, such creative spaces enable them to think about their roles in hurting others and their possible routes toward redemption. I want to be clear that without additional political organizing, such moments of catharsis and renewed responsibility will change neither the prison system nor the failed communities that produced these writers and speech-makers. For even the best students get shipped downstate or upstate or out-of-state to high-tech hell-holes where attending class will be replaced by the institutionalized torture of forced medications and permanent isolation. The lucky ones who are paroled find themselves dropped back into neighborhoods full of addicted friends, wary families, angry children, lousy housing, no healthcare, and dead-end jobs. When my students get out, as often as not, I watch helplessly as they sink back into poverty, dangerous behavior, and crippling depression—they want to spy divinity, but beauty has abandoned them. Still, we go to the prison each week hoping for the best, thinking of Tannenbaum's wise line about her prison writing workshop, in which she recalled that "love was the human gift we had to give, and we did our best to give it." Even while knowing that more work remains to be done, this seems like a good place to start.[32]

Writing for Our Lives: Prison Letters and Interpersonal Communication (Wood)

Writing from the confines of his Birmingham City Jail cell on April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a letter to a group of Alabama religious leaders who had issued a statement calling King's activism "unwise and untimely." "I am in Birmingham," King explained to his critics, "because injustice is here."[33] King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is part of a rich tradition of letters that illustrate the power of words that cannot be contained by a prison cell. From Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* to Rosa Luxemburg's *Spartakusbriefe* to George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, letters from prison offer a hopeful glimpse of the limits of imprisonment, for such communications suggest incarceration can neither stop thought nor prevent words from passing through the prison's walls.[34] In fact, as King's Birmingham statement illustrates, letters from prison can carry an authoritative moral force that is difficult to dismiss. As King told Alex Haley in 1965, his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" brought international attention to what was happening in Alabama and helped to win broad support both at home and abroad for the civil rights movement.[35] Whereas our first case study offered lessons in the artistry of agency, as pursued and embodied in poetry projects that moved from inside prison out into the public, I argue in this second case study that letters from prison stand at the crossroads of the personal and the political, in the liminal place where our interpersonal communication can blossom into political action.

Letters in the Context of Prison

Unlike prominent prison letters written by King, Jackson, and others, most letters written by people who are incarcerated are neither meant for public reading nor

designed to further a social movement. Yet the art of letter writing is thriving inside America's overcrowded prisons. Although visits and phone calls are a vital means to maintain relationships when one is incarcerated, many people serve time in prisons that are located hundreds of miles away from their home towns, making visits costly and rare. Moreover, the corporate monopoly on prison phone calls and the surveillance of those calls mean the telephone is prohibitively expensive and ultimately inadequate for maintaining intimate connections.[36] And so, in prison, letters remain a crucial connection to the world outside. As Janet Maybin's analysis of death-row penfriends explains, "writing and receiving letters takes on a central role in prisoners' lives."[37] Indeed, for those scholars and activists concerned with the ways oppressed people enact agency, I would argue that letters from prison offer a crucial site of concern and fertile ground for engagement.

While the relational practices of letter writing offer prisoners means of expression and connection to the world, they also pose unique challenges and opportunities to prison activists. For example, some activists argue we should, in our public activism, try to privilege the voices of people who are incarcerated—letters are obviously good vehicles for doing so. At the same time, other activists worry about the risks inherent in "speaking for" others, especially those whose voices have been silenced by incarceration.[38] In this section, I argue that letters written out of and into prison do not privilege the voices of people who are incarcerated as much as they serve to mingle the voices of those who live inside prison with those who live on the outside. Such letters, I suggest, are co-constructions of our voices and thus offer opportunities to explore more fully what incarceration means both inside and outside of prison. As such, the exchange of letters in the context of imprisonment is a profoundly personal and political process, for such letters help to maintain the interpersonal connections that prison too often severs. These interpersonal connections are political because they help to resist the isolation prison imposes on those of us who are incarcerated while also making prison ever-present in the lives of those of us who are free.

The dramatic rise of the prison–industrial complex in the United States over the past 35 years can be tracked against the equally dramatic transformation of communication practices that have emerged in the "information age." In the wake of laws that impose long prison terms, like the ubiquitous "three-strikes-and-you're-out" policies that swept across the country in the 1990s, a generation of men and women entered America's prisons to serve out life terms at a time when the Internet and email were in their infancy.[39] And so, while some prison officials are expressing alarm about smuggled cellphones as the latest contraband and security risk in prisons,[40] many people serving life terms in America's prisons today have never surfed the web, Googled, texted, or tweeted. Some of the more prominent political prisoners—such as Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier, and the Texas death-row prisoners addressed below—have websites, discussion lists, and Facebook and MySpace pages devoted to their cases, yet for the most part, America's incarcerated millions depend upon letters as their main form of communication with the outside world.

In any context, letter writing requires material goods: pens, paper, envelopes, and stamps. In prison, these are scarce and costly, and can be withheld as a form of punishment. Moreover, letter writing takes time, a commodity that may seem abundant in a prison setting; yet it can be as hard to come by in prison as it is anywhere else, especially when working long shifts and/or maintaining safety become a prisoner's primary occupation. In addition, letters can be screened by prison authorities and as such carry with them the risk that what gets written can also result in punishment.[41] Most importantly, while letter writing does not require literary flair, it does require literacy. While literacy rates among people incarcerated in the United States have increased over the last ten years, that fact is tempered by another: more Americans are incarcerated than ever before and prison literacy rates still track well below those in an average American household.[42] Viewed through the prison constraints addressed here, it is a marvel that any letters emerge from prison to be read, let alone that letters do, indeed, serve as a crucial vehicle for prisoners' voices.

Before shifting to a more autobiographical section of this essay, I close this part of my argument by noting that the path to freedom for many exonerated prisoners in the United States began with a handwritten letter to Innocence Project programs, and that media stories about prison abuses are often triggered by letters prisoners send to journalists. Though there are never enough to meet the demand, and though they do not play such explicitly political roles as letters sent to Innocence Projects or journalists, new prison pen-pals form every day, meaning the voices of prisoners continue to extend beyond their cells.[43] Thus, for those who live out their days in America's prisons, letters are an essential means of interpersonal and political connection to the outside. As the next section explores, these letters are also a vital means of connecting scholars and activists to what happens inside prisons. In this sense, prison-based letter-writing relationships amount to a mutual act of bearing witness to the dangers and dilemmas of the prison–industrial complex.[44]

Writing for Life

For more than 20 years I have been writing to a man in one of Pennsylvania's prisons who is serving a life term for murder. What began as an exchange about teaching and learning (he taught public speaking at a prison where I also taught communication courses) has become a friendship that has transformed us both. We did not begin our friendship with the intention of engaging in political practice, and over the years we have not been inclined to think about our letters as a form of public activism. Yet prison dominates even the simplest of exchanges, and it would be folly to assert the relationship we have developed in our letters is not deeply influenced by the political dynamics of prison and the larger cultural forces that support mass incarceration. If, as Ioan Davies writes, "prisons provide a constant element across all societies, more constant than chains of hamburger stores, films, television, radio, or money markets," then we cannot ignore what prison has made of us both.[45] More to the point: those of us on the outside who write to people in prison cannot ignore the many ways prison shapes our lives, not the least because that is where our friends, relatives, and

neighbors live while we spend our days in a society that keeps them caged in our names. Thus, even while driven by interpersonal relationships, letter-writing friendships in the context of prison are inescapably political.

For example, in writing to my incarcerated friend and reading his letters to me, the realities of prison life have become, because he has, part of my life. I have come to know the regulations, the schedules, the ever-changing and arbitrary rules, the frustrations of the prison medical system, and the daily rebukes and physical violence that make up the experiences of a person in prison. I make no claims to have experienced these conditions personally, but our letters make me a witness of—and in turn a critic of—such cruelties. Moreover, I have come to write in ways that account for my words being read by someone other than the person for whom they were intended, for I am attentive to their meanings getting caught up in the prison's web of surveillance. Should what I write to my friend provoke concern on the part of prison guards, I risk more than having the privilege of writing to my friend revoked, for I place him at risk in ways I can barely fathom. And so our letters are written under the shadow of possible rebuke, even danger, for my correspondent—we therefore write with the consequences of our words fully in mind.

I want to be clear that I am not claiming to know what it means to be imprisoned or that prison has become a part of my life in the same way it has come to define my friend's life. I do, however, want to suggest his letters, my letters, our exchanges and, most vitally, the friendship that has emerged from them, is the result of a conscious effort to resist the divide prison imposes on all of us. For family members and loved ones of people who are incarcerated, that effort often requires enormous will. As Megan Comfort argues, prisoners' relatives and intimates are also "caught in the revolving door of corrections, experience restricted rights, diminished resources, social marginalization, and other consequences of penal confinement, even though they are legally innocent and dwell outside of the prison walls."[46] While I am less directly affected than family members by this campaign of prison-driven guilt-by-association, choosing to build a friendship with a prisoner can lead to a strange political space, where one's motives are questioned, as if befriending a prisoner is somehow perverse. Yet as Mary Bosworth and her imprisoned collaborators note in their essay about interactions between the imprisoned and the free: "Human beings need relationships that are both rich and diverse. . . .We need to make new connections."[47] If we acknowledge the qualitative differences between the lives of the imprisoned, their marginalized loved ones, and those of us who try to support them, then we can create important spaces for mingling our voices and hence thinking collectively about how to resist the cultural, political, and personal divides that prison imposes on all of us.

I am arguing then, that our letter writing is an intertextual and collaborative process—we reply to each other. When such exchanges are carried out over time, each letter becomes a co-construction of both of the correspondents. It is therefore not possible to talk about letter writing as an avenue only for people who are incarcerated to express themselves, for by their very nature, such letters are an avenue for people who are incarcerated and those who are not incarcerated to speak

with each other, together. In doing so, we confirm each other's humanity and create opportunities for confronting the harm our incarcerated friends have caused and the confinement they now endure as a consequence of their actions. Because our dialogue breaches the physical walls of the institution and the social isolation prison imposes on us all, our interpersonal friendship stands as a political correspondence. For those of us on the outside who are committed to confronting the devastating consequences of mass incarceration, writing to people who are imprisoned is therefore not some selfless act of social service but a powerfully embodied mode of mutual respect, reflection, and resistance. We are all, in other words, writing for our lives.

The Fight Against Texas's Death Row: Existential Dread and Political Communication (McCann)

If prison is Hell, then death row is its Dante-esque inner circle. Currently, over 3,000 prisoners await execution on 34 death rows across the United States; for these men and women, there is no prospect of release, only the specter of state-sanctioned death.[48] Drawing upon five years of work as an anti-death-penalty activist in Texas, and addressing the ethical, practical, and communicative issues raised above, I advance a pedagogy of empowered citizenship that supports the efforts of death-row prisoners to transform silence into speech and action. The objectives that drive this project, while deeply connected to the modes of empowered citizenship described above, are also distinct in significant ways. Most obviously, the death-row inmate's very status represents a complete lack of faith in the prospect of "rehabilitation." Most states therefore do not allow death-row prisoners to participate in the kinds of educational programs chronicled earlier in this essay. Thus, any agenda designed to transform condemned silence into speech and action will be less interested in cultivating the artistic and interpersonal skills discussed by my coauthors than with empowering the condemned to participate in anti-death-penalty projects of explicitly political communication—for they are, in the most literal sense, writing for their lives. Nonetheless, as we shall see below, the political projects I have worked on with Texas's death-sentenced prisoners entail both artistic and interpersonal dimensions, and hence illustrate some of the communicative opportunities and challenges that affect our efforts to abolish executions.[49]

Known to many as the "Belly of the Beast," Texas is unrivaled in its use of the death penalty: since 1982, it has administered lethal injections to 441 individuals.[50] During my time in the state capital, Austin, I encountered many neighbors who were experiencing the wrath of Texas's execution apparatus, including the loved ones of the condemned and prisoners awaiting the executioner's needle. Among these was a group of condemned men who call themselves the Death Row Inner-Communalist Vanguard Engagement (DRIVE). Fashioning themselves as a militant vanguard among Texas's condemned, the men of DRIVE organized in spite of solitude and sensory deprivation to protest the death penalty and conditions on death row. Their primary channel of communication is a website maintained and promoted by

outside supporters, including myself. DRIVE therefore enacts one model of empowered citizenship, for it represents the capacity of the condemned to build agency through public confrontations with horror. While the voices that saturate the web-based universe of DRIVE are, in many ways, similar to those empowered in the context of the prison classroom or affirmed through epistolary communication, in matters of tone and content, the communications produced by DRIVE are markedly different than the materials addressed above, for they convey harder, more aggressive, and often outraged messages of what I call existential dread.

Silence and Isolation in the "Belly of the Beast"

While death-penalty abolitionists proclaim the barbarity of what takes place in the death chamber, they expend considerably less energy addressing the conditions of death row. While Texas executions take place at the infamous "Walls Unit" in Huntsville, prior to their execution dates inmates spend their sentences at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, where they occupy their single cells 23 hours per day. They have no group recreation privileges and no religious or vocational services, and can only change their visitation lists once every six months. All visits at Polunsky are non-contact—family members must communicate with their condemned loved ones through thick glass—meaning that death-row inmates in Texas will generally make physical contact only with prison officials from the time they enter prison to the day of their death. Such solitary confinement, and its accompanying sensory deprivation, has been shown to cause hallucinations, post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, paranoia, and suicidal thoughts in those who occupy such units temporarily; Texas death-row inmates experience these brutal conditions in perpetuity.[51] As current Texas death-row inmate Tony Ford declared in a 2007 newspaper interview, "Even though we stay 23 hours a day inside, a lot of people won't come out of their cells because they are broken. They are not whole."[52] There is no question that death row, certainly as practiced in Texas, amounts to institutionalized torture. Finding ways to empower the men warehoused at Polunsky to raise their voices in protest therefore strikes me as an ethical imperative that, as I discuss below, embeds me in a series of complicated communicative questions.

Projecting the Macabre: DRIVE, the Web, and Bearing Witness to Polunsky

Shortly after becoming pen-pals with one of DRIVE's founders, a death-row prisoner named Kenneth Foster, I began communicating with other DRIVE supporters and, along with other Texas abolitionists, envisioning strategies for publicizing their protests.[53] Much as Wood argues above, my engaging in prison-based letter writing morphed into other political activities. Nonetheless, support for the death penalty is significantly higher in Texas than in other states, meaning the project of humanizing the condemned or prompting anyone to care about their living conditions is an uphill battle. As numerous scholars have observed, victims and their families are the most privileged voices in mainstream death-penalty discourse. Still, many of us in the

anti-death-penalty community in Texas, while deeply sympathetic to the needs of victims' families, also see enabling the voices of the condemned as a political priority.[54]

The founding "comrades" (as they call themselves) of DRIVE come from disparate racial and experiential backgrounds, but all are condemned to die. They write in their collective mission statement:

> we have organized a group of passionate prisoner activists who have put aside all minor barriers of ethnicity, creed, color and beliefs, to focus on the injustices forced upon us by this system. By means of inner-resistance, organizing, outer petitions drives, protests and direct actions, we will solidify our stance and remain relentless in the fight against oppression![55]

One of the striking features of such DRIVE statements is the way these condemned men link their conditions to other global moments and prior historical periods of struggle. For example, Kenneth Foster invokes the horrors of Rwanda, Stalinism, and the slave trade while also recalling his own troubled history. He writes: "I've experienced my own [struggles]: was born in the ghetto; separated from my parents at a young age; lost my mother to AIDS; got a father lost in drugs; been jumped on and stabbed; sprayed with crowd control pepper gas." He concludes, "Nonetheless, I remain surging forth in life. I have refused to recede any further."[56] As illustrated here, Foster and his comrades do not view their protest as the work of men in isolated cells; rather, they situate themselves within global narratives of confrontation between justice and oppression. For example, in a poem posted on the DRIVE website, Gabriel Gonzalez writes: "I hear you Che Guevara/I hear you Assata Shakur/I hear you George Jackson. . ./EVERY DAY."[57] Thinking globally, Foster and Gonzalez situate themselves as comrades allied with impoverished peoples across history and geography; thinking domestically, they position themselves as proud participants in a tradition of radical anti-prison activism. In the absence of sanctioned pedagogical programs, these are the resources that have enabled the condemned men of DRIVE to begin the difficult work of transforming silence into speech and action.

Indeed, while many condemned individuals become broken by the pedagogy of pain, the founders of DRIVE use such experiences to forge political insights and bonds of solidarity. For example, Reginald Blanton depicts the existential violence of isolation, silence, and loneliness on death row in a poem in which he confesses that "I need affection,/ A woman's caress, and/ I want to be held,/ With my waves rubbed/ 'Til I fall asleep." It is a call for love amidst death row's pain. The plea for affection then segues into political defiance, as Blanton writes, "my captors/ Can't get me to follow their rules" because "I'm a man." In a heartbreaking meditation on the sensory deprivation of administrative segregation, Blanton transforms his coerced silence into speech. In doing so, he confronts the demons associated with the kind of isolation that can drive an individual mad. While the piece is gendered in ways that some activists may find problematic, I believe his closing claim, "I'm a man," is less of a boast of power and privilege than a desperate plea for recognition of his usually denied humanity.[58]

Other DRIVE members write even more explicitly political poems; for example, Gonzalez rebukes the Polunsky staff, to whom he declares:

> I understand you are weak./ I understand you fear me./ I understand you are. . ./A COWARD (AN OPPRESSOR!)/ Who can never take my spirit./ Who can never take my love./ Who can never take my hope./ Who can never ever break me!!![59]

Acknowledging the violence Polunsky inflicts on its prisoners' souls helps us realize that Gonzalez's burst of shouted resistance is more than just radical polemics and machismo-driven anger; rather, it provides evidence of what Kenneth Burke called "equipment for living."[60] Putting pen to paper keeps the condemned mind sane, it is life-saving work; as we argued above, "communication can save your life." Indeed, realizing what is at stake in the contest over representing death-row prisoners, Foster writes, "We seek to define ourselves so that when history is looked back upon they will know we are trendsetters." Drawing from the legacy of the civil rights struggle, Foster emphasizes the salience of non-violent resistance for DRIVE, arguing that "by taking the non-violent role we stand to not be the initiators of violence. We are peace and equality seekers."[61] Foster thus imagines himself and his DRIVE comrades—black, Hispanic, and white—as standing moral witness to the violence of Texas's death row. Their words are alternatives to the dominant narrative of crime and punishment in America, for they amount to declarations of the humanity of the condemned and celebrations of a proud tradition of struggle. Foster asks, then, for the same thing hoped for by many disempowered groups: we seek to define ourselves.

Existential Challenges of Speaking on and about Death Row

While some condemned prisoners have compelling claims of innocence (and most of the men of DRIVE insist they are among them),[62] the vast majority of men and women held on America's death rows are guilty of unspeakable crimes. Prisoners in general are difficult to love, but death-row inmates are downright despicable in the eyes of many, if not most, citizens. Certainly many of the people of Texas could not care less about the day-to-day workings of Polunsky. Reasonable people can argue about the merits of executing criminals, but why waste time agonizing over the living conditions of murderers slated to die? Thus far, the most open recipients of DRIVE's militant and humanizing rhetoric have been death-penalty opponents in Europe, a region that has abandoned the death penalty and finds America's continued use of it perplexing and offensive. These international collaborations have produced some welcome results. For example, in 2006, I received an unexpected telephone call from the office of the chair of the Texas House Corrections Committee; he had received several letters from European and American citizens regarding death-row conditions in Texas that mentioned me as a local contact. On another occasion, the Texas office of the American Civil Liberties Union sought me out to discuss possible litigation regarding living conditions at Polunsky. In both cases, the DRIVE website had disseminated the crucial information—the website was working. While I do not envision sharing the George Jackson-inspired words of DRIVE with a Texas legislator,

I will sell their chapbooks and read their poems at lively anti-death-penalty rallies outside that legislator's office. As social movements scholar Herbert Haines has observed, successful movements are often complex tapestries of mainstream and radical elements that coalesce to transform the political climate around a central cause.[63] If a visit to the DRIVE website inspires someone to contact her representative or to attend a protest, then our web-based political communication is making an impact. Indeed, while confronting the horrors of death and loneliness in Texas is slow, agonizing work, the small success stories shared here indicate the utility of helping the men of DRIVE to find a public voice.

In addition to producing written work, many of the DRIVE "comrades" engage in routine acts of nonviolent civil disobedience, ranging from occupying exercise spaces and corridors to refusing to relinquish food trays or handcuffs. Such acts are typically met by exposure to noxious riot gas and transportation to the most restrictive level of death row. It is the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's policy to record such uses of force; some of these revealing tapes have been acquired and posted online by DRIVE supporters.[64] They are difficult to watch. While I believe these videos represent another important mechanism for turning silence into speech and action, they also haunt me, for they represent a fundamental imbalance at the heart of what we do when we work with the incarcerated. At the end of the day, we will lie down in a comfortable bed, enjoy human touch, teach our students, perform our research, and engage in activism with the protections of the First Amendment. The incarcerated and the condemned will do none of these things. While I remain convinced of the ethical and political importance of giving voice to those sentenced to die by a cruel state apparatus, I wince at the fact that I do so at significantly less cost than those on the inside. At worst, I risk having my letters and visits banned from death row, but these men, as Wood noted above as well, risk physical pain and further separation from their families. While this tension need not give way to political paralysis, it adds to the fundamental horror of staring state-sanctioned death in the face.

Conclusion: "To Embrace the Sacredness of Life"

Using our experiences as teachers, activists, and engaged citizens as the basis for our arguments, we have offered three case studies illustrating different ways that we have worked with and advocated for imprisoned men and women. We have tried to speak of our efforts humbly while always foregrounding the inescapable fact that our imprisoned students, correspondents, and political collaborators face difficult and sometimes harrowing situations wherein the very act of communicating with us may place them in danger. Still, despite the hardships they face, the incarcerated men and women chronicled here desperately need to communicate with us, not only as means of maintaining their own senses of humanity, or of advancing their educations, or of trying to save their lives, but also to help those of us on the outside to see more clearly the many ways our incarceration nation is warping the fabric of democracy. We have agreed with prominent prison scholars regarding the salience of prisoner

testimony and witnessing—these are indeed crucial tools in our collective efforts to abolish the prison–industrial complex. But whereas some of our colleagues privilege the agency of radicalized prisoner-activists, we see our three case studies as equally emancipatory, albeit fraught with all the complications of working within America's gulags. As Hames-García observes, the goal of all such work is to "increase opportunities for freedom and human development."[65] And so we have argued that the voices addressed in our case studies represent key contributions to our collective effort to dismantle the prison–industrial complex.

In closing, our case studies of communication in action teach us these important lessons: that the projects discussed here are life-affirming for all of their participants; that when such communications are taken to the public, whether as artistic, interpersonal, or political efforts, they can become powerful forms of enlightenment and persuasion; that the deep interpersonal relationships built through our efforts offer existential challenges—and therefore growth opportunities—to everyone involved; that these projects, each in their own way, carry implications for how we think about the obligations and opportunities of pedagogy; and that even as we confront the horrors of the prison–industrial complex, such projects offer us opportunities to "spy the divine" in daily life, and hence to reclaim both beauty and agency for our own purposes. Agreeing with Burke that communication is "equipment for living," we close with the hope that perhaps the lessons learned from these case studies will enable other teachers, scholars, artists, and activists to join in the movement to abolish the prison–industrial complex by doing all they can, wherever they can, to support a new pedagogy of empowered citizenship. Our goal then, has been to offer some small contribution toward expanding the circle of those who can say, along with Kenneth Foster, that they chose to "embrace the sacredness of life and sought to assert the full measure of their humanity in the face of those who would seek to destroy it."[66]

Notes

[1] *Marciano Plata et al. v. Arnold Schwarzenegger et al.,* No. C01–1351 THE (E.D. Cal. and N.D. Cal. 2009) at 6, 7, 10, 16, 42, and 153. For context, see Solomon Moore, "Court Orders California to Cut Prison Population," *New York Times*, February 9, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/10/us/10prison.html (accessed October 7, 2009).

[2] *Plata v. Schwarzenegger et al.,* 183; and see Jon M. Taylor, "Post-Secondary Correctional Education: An Evaluation of Effectiveness and Efficiency," *Journal of Correctional Education* 43, no. 3 (1992): 132–41.

[3] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press), 40.

[4] See Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); and Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education (PCARE), "Fighting the Prison–Industrial Complex: A Call to Communication and Cultural Studies Scholars to Change the World," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2007): 402–20.

[5] Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 89.

[6] Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 3–4.

[7] See Michael Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

[8] See Stephen John Hartnett, "The Annihilating Public Policies of The Prison–Industrial Complex; or, Crime, Violence, and Punishment in An Age of Neo-Liberalism," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11, no. 3 (2008): 491–533; and Erica Meiners, *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and The Making of Public Enemies* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[9] Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Towards a Pedagogy for the Opposition, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001).

[10] Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought*, xliii.

[11] Eleanor Novek, "'The Devil's Bargain': Censorship, Identity, and the Promise of Empowerment in a Prison Newspaper," *Journalism* 6, no. 1 (2005): 6.

[12] PCAP, "Statement of Commitment," quoted in Buzz Alexander, *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother? Twenty Years of the Prison Creative Arts Project* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 233. On the relationship between prisoner protest and prison pedagogy, see Gabrielle Banks, "Learning under Lockdown," *Colorlines* 6, no. 1 (2003): 12–6; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 57–9; and *The Last Graduation: The Rise and Fall of College Programs in Prison*, directed by Barbara Zahm (New York: Deep Dish TV, 1997), VHS.

[13] Pew Center on the States, *One-in-100: Behind Bars in America* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008), 5, 11.

[14] Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Justice Expenditure and Employment Extracts, 2006* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, 2008); the data table is accessible at http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=1022 (accessed September 8, 2011).

[15] Erika Wood and Rachel Bloom, *De Facto Disenfranchisement* (New York: ACLU, 2008). The term "labor disenfranchisement" is from Paul Street, "Color Blind: Prisons and the New American Racism," in *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*, ed. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (New York: Routledge, 2003), 32.

[16] See Carol Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in US Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Bill Yousman, "Inside *Oz*: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (2009): 265–84.

[17] Stephen John Hartnett, ed., "Introduction: Empowerment or Incarceration? Reclaiming Hope and Justice from a Punishing Democracy," in *Challenging the Prison–Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1–13.

[18] Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (New York: Perennial, 2002), xxi.

[19] *Jailbirds*, directed by Jon Rutter (Muncie, IN: Pineapple & Jalapeno Productions, 1993), VHS.

[20] See Patricia Yaeger, ed., "Editor's Column: Prisons, Activism, and the Academy—A Roundtable with Buzz Alexander, Bell Gale Chevigny, Stephen John Hartnett, Janie Paul, and Judith Tannenbaum," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (2008): 545–67.

[21] Prison Justice Project, *Captured Words/Free Thoughts*, http://prisonjusticeproject.org/capturedwords/?cat = 1 (accessed August 15, 2011).

[22] Alexander, *Is William Martinez Not Our Brother*? 2–3.

[23] A similar strategy drives Robin Sohnen's Each One Reach One theater ensemble. See "Play-Writing & Community Activism as Redemption and Prevention," in *Challenging the Prison–Industrial Complex*, ed. Stephen John Hartnett, 181–200.

[24] Judith Tannenbaum, *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 20.

[25] Ibid., 91.

[26] Letting go of pretense thus becomes the first step toward building solidarity with the disenfranchised—see Garrett Albert Duncan, "Beyond Love: A Critical Race Ethnography of the Schooling of Adolescent Black Males," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 35, no. 2 (2002): 131–43; and Phillip K. Tompkins, *Who is My Neighbor? Communicating and Organizing to End Homelessness* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009).

[27] On involving undergraduates in such projects, see Buzz Alexander, "'A Piece of the Reply': The Prison Creative Arts Project and Practicing Resistance," in *Challenging the Prison–Industrial Complex*, ed. Stephen John Hartnett, 149–78; and Lori Pompa "Breaking Down the Walls: Inside-Out Learning & the Pedagogy of Transformation," in *Challenging the Prison–Industrial Complex*, ed. Stephen John Hartnett, 253–72.

[28] Big Ern, quoted in Tannenbaum, *Disguised as a Poem*, 53.

[29] Anonymous, "I Look for Beauty" (unpublished manuscript used with permission, July 2010), Microsoft Word file.

[30] For examples of "spying divinity" amidst hard times, see Stephen John Hartnett, *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004).

[31] The themes noted here are found in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* and other prison-based collections, including Tobi Jacobi, ed., *Can Anyone Hear Me Scream?* (Fort Collins, CO: SpeakOut! Women's Writing Workshop, 2008); Kal Waggenheim, ed., *Inside/Out: Voices from the New Jersey State Prison* (Livermore, CA: WingSpan, 2009); Jennifer Scaife, ed., *Open Line* (San Quentin, CA: Prison University Project, 2008); and Buzz Alexander and Janie Paul, ed., *Doing Time, Making Space* (Ann Arbor: PCAP, 2005).

[32] Tannenbaum, *Disguised as a Poem*, 199; and see Stephen John Hartnett, "Communication, Social Justice, and Joyful Commitment," *Western Journal of Communication* 74, no. 1 (2010): 68–93.

[33] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 64.

[34] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (1971; repr., New York: International Publishers, 2003); Rosa Luxemburg, *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Stephen E. Bronner (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978); and George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970; repr., Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994).

[35] This conversation is noted in James A. Colaiaco, "The American Dream Unfulfilled: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" *Phylon* 45, no. 1 (1984): 1–18.

[36] See Steven J. Jackson, "Mapping the Prison Telephone Industry," in *Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarceration*, ed. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (New York: The New Press, 2007), 235–49.

[37] Janet Maybin, "Death Row Penfriends: Some Effects of Letter Writing on Identity and Relationships," in *Letter Writing as Social Practice*, ed. David Barton and Nigel Hall (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 151.

[38] See Jennifer Asenas, Bryan J. McCann, Kathleen Feyh, and Dana L. Cloud, "Saving Kenneth Foster: Speaking with Others in the Belly of the Beast," in *Communication Activism Volume Three: Communication for Social Change*, ed. Lawrence R. Frey and Kevin M. Carragee (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Forthcoming).

[39] For historical context, see William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[40] See Patrick McGreevey, "Thousands of Cell Phones Confiscated in Prisons," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2009, http://articles.latimes.com/2009/oct/02/local/me-prisons2 (accessed November 15, 2009).

[41] See Mary Bosworth, Debi Campbell, Bonita Demby, Seth M. Ferranti, and Michael Santos, "Doing Prison Research: Views from Inside," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (2005): 249–64.

[42] See Elizabeth Greenburg, Eric Dunleavy, and Mark Kutner, *Literacy Behind Bars: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

[43] An internet search for prison pen pals yields an array of sites: some, such as LifeLines, are nonprofits; others, such as PrisonPenPals.com, produce a profit.

[44] On the political uses of such letters, see Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld, and Jim Dwyer, *Actual Innocence: Five Days to Execution, and Other Dispatches from the Wrongly Convicted* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

[45] Ioan Davies, *Writers in Prison* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 232.

[46] Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7.

[47] Bosworth et al., "Doing Prison Research," 27.

[48] At yearend 2007, it was reported that there were 3,220 prisoners under sentence of death in America. Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Capital Punishment Statistics," January 23, 2009, http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cp.htm (accessed October 13, 2009).

[49] For overviews of the death penalty, see Stuart Banner, *The Death Penalty: An American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), and Stephen John Hartnett, *Executing Democracy, Volume One: Capital Punishment & The Making of America, 1683–1807* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

[50] The figures offered here begin in 1982 because that year marked the first execution in Texas following the 1976 US Supreme Court decision in *Gregg v. Georgia*, which lifted the national moratorium on executions mandated by the 1974 decision in *Furman v. Georgia*. Both decisions are available in *The Death Penalty in America, Current Controversies*, ed. Hugo Adam Bedau (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 189–95 and 196–205.

[51] See Ralph Blumenthal, "Texas Inmates Protest Conditions with Hunger Strikes," *New York Times*, November 8, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/08/us/08prison.html (accessed October 16, 2009); and Human Rights Watch, "Mental Illness, Human Rights, and US Prisons," September 22, 2009, http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/22/mental-illness-human-rights-and-us-prisons (accessed November 20, 2009).

[52] Quoted in Fanny Carrier, "Staying Alive on Death Row, a Daily Battle against Despair," *Agence France Presse*, November 6, 2007, via LexisNexis (accessed August 1, 2011).

[53] Texas Governor Rick Perry commuted Foster's death sentence in 2007. See Asenas et al., "Speaking with Others."

[54] See Markus Dirk Dubber, *Victims in the War on Crime: The Use and Abuse of Victims' Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Bryan J. McCann, "Therapeutic and Material <Victim > hood: Ideology and the Struggle for Meaning in the Illinois Death Penalty Controversy," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2007): 382–401; and Jennifer K. Wood, "Justice as Therapy: The Victim Rights Clarification Act," *Communication Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2003): 296–311.

[55] DRIVE "Introduction," http://drivemovement.org/ (accessed November 19, 2009).

[56] Kenneth Foster Jr., "My Epiphany," DRIVE, http://drivemovement.org/#/my-epiphany/4519624624 (accessed November 19, 2009).

[57] Gabriel Gonzalez, "To the Lynch Mob," DRIVE, http://drivemovement.org/#/to-the-lynch-mob/4519640196 (accessed November 19, 2009). For context, see Jackson, *Soledad Brother*; Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Westport, CN: Lawrence Hill, 1987); and James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*.

[58] Reginald Blanton, "A Man," DRIVE, http://drivemovement.org/#/a-man/4519640497 (accessed October 15, 2009). On the history of "I am a man" in the civil rights

movement, see Laurie B. Green, "Race, Gender, and Labor in 1960s Memphis: 'I Am a Man' and the Meaning of Freedom," *Journal of Urban History* 30, no. 3 (2004): 465–89.

[59] Gonzalez, "To the Lynch Mob."

[60] Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941; repr., Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 293–304.

[61] Kenneth Foster Jr., "DRIVE and Where it Stands in Light of a Non-Violent or Passive Movement," DRIVE, http://drivemovement.org/#/drive-and-where/4519623787 (accessed October 20, 2009).

[62] Since 1973, 138 individuals have been released from death row after their convictions were overturned. Death Penalty Information Center, *Facts about the Death Penalty* (Washington, DC: Author, updated September 7, 2011), 2, http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/FactSheet.pdf (accessed September 8, 2011).

[63] Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

[64] DRIVE, "Rob's Use of Force Videos," http://drivemovement.org/#/u-o-force-vids-1/4521140566 (accessed July 27, 2011). For more on the "cell extraction" techniques used to assault prisoners, see Hartnett, *Incarceration Nation*, 73–86, and Ted Conover, *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 131–36.

[65] Hames-García, *Fugitive Thought*, 251.

[66] Foster, "DRIVE and Where it Stands."