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# **Critical Anthological Imagination: Looking Historically at Prisoners Writing About Themselves as Adult Learners in the United States (1966-2006)**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents some initial findings from an analysis of published anthologies written by prisoners in the U. S. about how they view their own educational advancement, schooling, and their role as adult learners within the context of their incarcerated lives.

## **Introduction**

A British journalist once asked Malcolm X the name of his alma mater. Malcolm X responded “books.” In his autobiography, he recounts the role that books played in his life: I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. I certainly wasn’t seeking any degree the way a college confers a status symbol upon its students. My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America (Malcolm X, 1966, p. 179).

Prisoners’ experiences have long captured the imagination of scholars, literary authors, activists, journalists, sociologists, politicians, and even adult educators. While the documentation of prisoners’ lives has often focused on the sociological and criminal justice perspectives of incarceration, many scholars are interested in prisoner education and prisoner learning

<sup>1</sup> (Baird, 1994, 1999, Davidson, 1995, Kilgore, 1999; Clark, 2001). Yet prisoners' interpretations of their own educational experiences and how they view themselves as adult learners has not been the subject of much formal analyses. Hitherto, there has been no analysis that has looked specifically at the genre of published prison narratives written by U. S. prisoners and how they view their learning within the context of a prison institution. This void in the scholarly adult education literature is troubling given the drastic increase in incarceration rates. The U.S. prison population has increased by 334 percent since 1980 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). The number of prisons in this country continues to grow exponentially, and despite the increase in the number of inmates, prison educational programming continues to be cut. This paper presents some initial findings from an analysis of published anthologies written by prisoners in the U. S. about how they view their own educational advancement, schooling, and their role as adult learners within the context of their incarcerated lives.

### **Purpose of this exploration**

Mark Twain once expressed that there had probably been more said about educating prisoners and less done about it than anything else in the United States. The exception to this case is prisoner education, or self-initiated learning on the part of prisoners. The historical literature has often portrayed prisoners as passive agents being acted upon or against (Davidson, 1995). Yet examples such as Malcolm X's indicate that prisoners do possess agency and often leave their incarceration experiences with a critical understanding of the larger political and societal forces that played a factor in their incarceration. Jimmy Santiago Baca describes this critical understanding as a "coming to language."

In his own prison narrative, Baca (1991) describes the "freedom" he felt when his fellow chain gang inmates read to him the words of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemingway. He writes, "The language of poetry was the magic that could liberate me from myself, transform me into another person, transport me to places far away" (101). Yet when the books were closed he experienced a bicultural understanding of language: "...these Chicanos went into their own Chicano language, they made barrio life come alive for me in the fullness of its vitality. I began to learn my own language, the bilingual words and phrases explaining to me my place in the universe. ...I always had thought reading a waste of time, that nothing could be gained by it. Only by action, by moving out into the world and confronting and challenging the obstacles, could one learn anything worth knowing" (p. 102).

It can be argued that Malcolm X and Jimmy Baca as "marginalized learners" had learned to "read the world" and "read the word" (Freire and Macedo, 1987). They had engaged in critical literacy practices and come to an understanding of the cultural, political, and social practices that constituted their reality (Degener, 2001). Critical learning had taken place. Yet how common is the experience of Malcolm X and Jimmy Baca? Do other prisoners write of their "coming to language" and "new vistas"? Do other

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<sup>1</sup> For the scope of this paper, I use Dante Germanotta's (1995) distinction between prison education and prisoner education. Prison education is the formal activities offered by prison education staff. Prisoner education is self-initiated learning, and while it "can take place within general prison education programs, sponsored by an outside agency or by the prison itself. It can take place through self-initiated learning or through experiencing the graphic contradictions of prison life itself" (p. 106).

prisoners have these types of transformational learning experiences and develop a critical consciousness?

Since prisons are documented to be oftentimes brutal, unforgiving, and oppressive, the purpose of this review is to conduct a textual analysis of book-length anthologies, written by prisoners about their incarceration experiences, to determine how prisoners describe their educational experiences. The research questions that drive this literature review are: *what relevant themes emerge from the literature regarding prisoner education; how do prisoners describe their experiences with prison and prisoner education; through what frameworks do prisoners view educational advancement; how, and in what ways, do they define themselves as adult learners in their narratives; and what can adult educators learn about the educational needs of prisoners from their own words?*

### *Bodies of Literature Analyzed*

Two main bodies of literature were analyzed as a part of this study: (1) first person prison narratives included in anthologies and (2) autobiographical book length prisoner accounts. The nonfiction prisoner narratives included in this study all appear in edited anthologies and were published between the years 1970-2006. For the larger study, autobiographical accounts of prisoners are also being reviewed (e.g., Malcolm X, Jimmy Bacca, Eldridge Cleaver, Jack Henry Abbott, Mumia Abu-Jamal). These span the years 1966-2006. Given the limited length of this paper, though, I focus on prisoner narratives contained in two anthologies: *Undoing Time: American Prisoners in Their own Words* (n=36) and *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing, A PEN American Center Prize Anthology* (n=79). All written pieces were written by prisoners either during or shortly after their incarceration. Each narrative was obtained, read in its entirety, and reviewed. It is necessary to note that while this selection of 115 prisoner narratives represent a broad spectrum of experiences and held beliefs, their authors do not represent a true cross-section of the United States' prisoners. The stories/voices of juveniles, individuals with low-levels of literacy, foreign nationals detained in U.S. prisons, county jail detainees, individuals classified as "criminally insane," and military prisoners are absent from these narratives.

Narrative analysis within a historical lens provides a useful framework for analyzing forty years of prisoner's writings (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Since the narrative process "seeks to collect data to describe...lives" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 86), the texts could be analyzed to actively understand the participant's "voice" within a particular time, place, and the context of a prison setting. Germanotta's (1999) three phases of the dialectics of prison education also informed the analysis. His three phases of how prisoners make connections with prison education programs and critical pedagogy was utilized to establish thematic categories across the prison narratives. It is through this lens that I developed the term "critical anthological imagination."

### **Findings: Theorizing from the Literature**

Bell Gale Chevigny (1999) describes how academics are seeking ways to integrate prison issues into American studies. This includes "prizing prison writing as the supreme expression of America's underclass and an important field of American literature with its own complex traditions" (p. xviii). Prison writing exposes one to a rich archive of literary, linguistic, political, educational, and social cultures behind bars. It is

through the divergent realities of prison nonfiction writers that one bears witness to the shaped experiences of individuals living incarcerated lives.

Five themes emerged from this selection of first person prisoner accounts: (1) Doing Writing as opposed to Doing Time, (2) Learning as Offering Protection, (3) Finding Inner Liberty: An exploration of Self, (4) Transformational: Imagining Alternatives, (5) a “Consolation for a Civilian Audience.” All of these themes demonstrate not only a critical understanding of the writers own experiences as prisoners but also the critical imagination required to bear witness unflinchingly to their incarcerated lives.

According to Craig Haney (2001) the economic and social marginalization of many prisoners from early in their lives results in the denial of legitimate narrative power or what the linguist Robin Lakoff (2000) termed “language rights.” When prisoners describe “Doing Writing as opposed to Doing Time” they are reclaiming the self-expression they lost when others began to comment on, characterize, form opinions about, and pass judgment on the occasion of their crime. Rarely have the life experiences of these men and women been solicited prior to their incarceration. Many prisoners describe how prison offers them the first real opportunity of time and space to think and reflect. Yet prison is not often a safe space to share these self-reflections in conversation. Instead, both male and female prisoners describe how they turn to writing.

J. C. Amerchele (1994) recalls how writing “was our first attempt to give something from within rather than to take from others...to act instead of react” (p. 98). Jimmy Santiago Baca (1991) in his essay “Coming into Language” describes how before learning to read and write in prison he felt as if he were born into a raging ocean with no solid ground beneath him. That changed when he became a self-professed writer:

But when at last I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. ...Suddenly, through language, through writing, my grief and my joy could be shared with anyone who would listen. ...Through language I was free (p. 103).

By *Doing Writing* as opposed to doing time inmates are able to rise above their time in prison rather than simply going through it. It allows the inmates what Bell Chevigny (1999) calls the “feeling of doing” not the feeling of being done (p. xxiv).

Many prisoners describe learning as a form of new found protection. Tonya Star Jones (2001) in her personal narrative titled, “What It’s like Being a Drag Queen in the Illinois Department of Corrections” recounts suffering years of sexual, physical, and verbal abuse at the hands of other inmates. It was Anita Hill’s testimony in the Clarence Thomas’ confirmation hearings that sparked Tonya’s interest in law. “I said to myself then and there that I was going to start taking notes and lodging complaints with the proper authorities whenever I felt I was being sexually harassed, and that’s what I did. I began spending hours upon hours studying law in the prison law library. I even filed two lawsuits to be allowed to wear panties, dresses, and a training bra while in prison” (Jones, 2001, p. 120). Jones describes how this educative process stopped the abuse and “Unlike other [prison] drag queens, I am totally independent, financially and otherwise” (p. 120).

For some prisoners, their prisoner education becomes their salvation, a contemplative exercise where they find their inner liberty. For them prison is simply a state of mind. Ronnie Turner (2001) describes this process when he writes,

Have you ever read a book that changed your whole outlook on life? That happened to me after reading Tomas Merton's *Contemplation at the Garden of Gethsemane*. Merton said that a monastery could be like a prison for a monk who thought he had to be there. It occurred to me that if a monastery could be like a prison, then a prison could be like a monastery. The only difference Thomas Merton's monks displayed was the difference in their attitude. I reasoned that I could change my prison into a monastery by changing my attitude about where I was and why I was there (p. 216).

Ronnie describes how for him splitting his days between bible and academic study results in an inner sanctuary. For him, "The best university in the world, ultimately, is but a pile of books" (p. 219).

Prisoners, such as Judee Norton (1990) are able to convert prison images into a thing of beauty. In her poem, "Arrival" her handcuffs become her jewelry. She writes, "Bright shiny bracelets/ jangling on my arm/ wide leather belt snug about my waist/ chains dangling seductively between my legs/ I am captured/ but not subdued" (p. 22). Another woman Kathy when describing what she gained from the Bedford Hills Writing Workshop described how she "found a space that would, on a regular basis, give me permission to look at the inner self and walk in it" (Bedford Hills Writing Workshop (BHWW), 1999, p. 115).

It is not surprising that many of the prisoner narratives recount moments of self-transformation when the inmate imagines an alternative future set of life circumstances or reexamines his or her present set of circumstances. A female inmate at Bedford Hills describes it as "Not only finding our voices, but also believing that these voices mean something beyond our private world" (BHWW, 1998, p. 118). Another writes, "I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that the workshop has played a role in my reclaiming myself and my humanity" (BHWW, 1998, p. 117). Jan describes how seeing her words in print made her believe in herself and her dreams: "When I was young I was full of dreams, I used to tell my friends in school I was going to 'make the book.' It was my way of saying that I would achieve some wonderful thing in my life that everyone would know about. Seeing my work, pieces of my life laid out in our book, made me feel I had fulfilled that prophecy" (BHWW, 1998, p. 117).

Understandably, not all prisoners view education as positive. Some feel it is a "consolation for a civilian audience" and "forced upon the writer" (St. John, 1994, p. 121, p.122). Without prisoners there could be no prison writing, so Paul St. John in "Behind the Mirror's Face" implores his fellow prisoners to take the subject of prison out of their art. In these prisoner narratives, we sense that sharing one's writing for "outsiders" to read is another form of succumbing to the confines of the industrial complex of prisons. This reiterates the terrible double-bind or the intolerable choices prison writers face for their craft.

### **Implications for adult education theory and practice**

Given the fact that there are approximately *2.1 million* people in United States prisons and jails today, *6.7 million* people under state supervision, and given the fact that one in every 32 Americans will serve time at some point in their lives, serious consideration should be given to researching the role prisoner education *has* served and *can* currently serve within prison institutions (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). The number of mandatory (compulsory) prison education programs continues to grow;

whereby, prisoners if they are designated functionally illiterate are compelled to attend schools for specified periods and denied parole hearings or prevented from participating in treatment programs until they comply. Yet if possibilities for critical pedagogy and critical literacy development do exist within the confines of a correctional facility, it behooves adult educators and those currently imprisoned to know how to implement these processes. My preliminary research indicates that the words of the incarcerated offer us forty years of insight and wisdom into these very processes. For those of us who do teach in the confines of a prison and wish to see ourselves engage in the practice of critical education, yet have thought it near impossible given the social context of where we teach, this historical exploration of prisoners' writings offers us a glimpse as to how it is possible to develop not only critical understanding but a critical imagination.

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