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"The Secret Souls of Criminals:" A Different Prison Teaching Story

"Why are you here?" Mr. Jones asked me in his Jamaican accent as he carefully took off his glasses and laid them on the desk. "Why are you doing this?"

The other inmates in the writing workshop looked expectantly at me, waiting for my answer. The only sounds in the small, grimy classroom decorated with primary-school posters were those of bouncing basketballs and sneakers squeaking against the wood floor of the gym next door. Mr. Jones' question took me by surprise; why was I, a middle-aged, middle-class, white woman sitting in a small, stuffy classroom with eight black male inmates in a medium-security prison at nine on a Tuesday evening? I couldn't quite imagine the polite, dutiful undergraduates I taught during the day asking anything so personal. Did I indeed know why I was there? I felt a rush of emotions as I struggled to find words. The eight men looked at me and waited for my answer. The sky outside the small, grimy rectangular classroom window, open only a few inches even on this warm night, darkened.

There are no easy answers to Mr. Jones's question, and perhaps no one who teaches in the complex, contradictory, and often tense prison environment should be looking for easy answers. However, the years that have passed since the night Mr. Jones first posed his question have allowed me, after much reflection, to understand both the reasons why his question initially made me so uncomfortable as well as the importance, and even necessity, of his question. This essay explores three main components of my eventual understanding of "why I was there." Mr. Jones's question helped me understand the nature of the prison classroom, with its possibilities of more challenging teaching, the often passionate level of engagement of the inmate students, the attending seduction and danger of the "teacher as hero" narrative, and finally, the unsettling possibility that I was in collusion with the institution. While there may ultimately be no "resolution" to these issues, I did come to understand the necessity of engaging in deep reflection on why I was teaching in a prison classroom and on how I might develop a way to think about that teaching in a new light. Perhaps each of us needs to articulate our truths for ourselves and try to see the complexity of any classroom situation before we can honestly face our students and have the right to ask for their respect and trust.

The Writing Workshop: Some Background

I had been teaching in prison, both in a college correctional facility program that had been terminated by loss of state and federal funding, and as the volunteer coordinator of a writing workshop, for close to twenty years the night that Mr. Jones asked me "Why are you here?" Prison teaching had been the very first teaching I had ever done, and as a young and inexperienced teacher, I had experienced my share of difficult classroom moments in the twelve years I had spent teaching in the college program. These "disruptions," however, were relatively few and far between; the students were motivated and eager to learn, and classroom discussions were often intellectually stimulating and often sophisticated well beyond the discussions held in my on-campus classes. Despite the occasional difficulties, like other prison teachers (Hedin, Jacobi, Stanford, Tannenbaum), I was "hooked" on the intense, engaging and challenging experience of prison teaching; I understood, also, the importance of access to higher education for inmates.

When all state and federal funding for higher education programs in New York state prisons was ended in 1995, I began the voluntary creative writing workshop in the medium-security men's prison I had been teaching writing and literature in for several years as part of a college program. The college program had been offered in three area men's prisons—there were no women's prisons nearby—and had offered associate's and bachelor's degree-granting programs. Joseph Burzynski, in his 2010 *Open Words* article " Conflating Language and Offense: Composing in an Incarcerated Space," summarizes the move from the creation of correctional facility college programs in the post-Attica 1970s to the reduction of the number of many such programs after grant funding was eliminated after the enactment of the "Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994" (13), a move seen in the prison where I taught; the college program was eliminated after the loss of state and federal funding. As Joseph Lockard noted in his 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication presentation, "Prison Education as a Human Right," the loss of many such college programs meant that there were few educational programs available in correctional facilities (beyond the often-mandated and test-driven GED classes) to the ever-growing population of incarcerated men and women in the US, a population disproportionately composed of members of minority groups and the lowest economic classes (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2009). The loss of the college program was particularly significant as numerous statistics show that participation in higher education programs had the most significant impact on recidivism rates of any kind of programming available in prisons (Lockard).

Losing the prison program was devastating for students in the program and for teachers as well. While I could not offer workshop participants college credit or degrees, I took the opportunity to create a voluntary, bi-weekly workshop open to any inmate who wanted to

attend. The workshop was an opportunity to offer an educational program beyond the GED classes, to allow the men to engage in literacy activities that offered many personal and social benefits and to work with writers outside of the boundaries of school writing, required exit exams, and grades. While they could not earn college degrees, I could offer them a space in which to write, read, reflect, receive feedback for their work, and publish: I could offer them a space where they could create an identity beyond that of "inmate" or "criminal." The workshop became a place where we treated each other with respect and as adults; as a carryover from the college program, the men addressed me as "Dr. Rogers" and began calling each other "Mr. Jones" and "Mr. Howard," in an attempt to equalize the many disparities between us, to show respect for one another, and to distinguish the workshop space as a place where they were more than the Date of Incarceration (DIN) numbers they were often identified by in the rest of the facility.

The workshop is, as Tobi Jacobi points out in her "Foreword" for the *Reflections* special issue on "Prison Literacies, Narratives and Community Connections," only one of many variations of such programs existing in prisons, jails, and juvenile detention centers. As Jacobi also notes in her article "Writing Workshops as Alternative Literacy Education for Incarcerated Women," such workshops "can provide incarcerated writers with motivation to improve literacy skills and self-confidence through creative experiences and participation…that reaches beyond crime-as-identity"(55). Jacobi explains the many ways participants can benefit from such programs; writing workshops offer, according to Jacobi, rare opportunities for civic engagement, reflection on life experiences, and publication. As the workshop coordinator and teacher, I have certainly seen all of the benefits Jacobi describes enacted for the workshop participants.

Recent literature (Jacobi, Tannenbaum, Lamb, Stanford) focuses on the benefits of these workshops for inmates even while acknowledging the difficulties of prison teaching. Since teaching the workshop, I have experienced my share of what Jacobi names as "the material conditions" of teaching in prison. Administration will routinely "lose" the call-out that allows students to attend class, confiscate student writing, and confine inmate writers to "special housing units" for their "inappropriate writing." I have also heard (some) corrections officers make insulting and degrading comments to students on their way to class. Narratives about teaching writing in prison often locate difficulty in the prison setting and/or administration, which is where the problem legitimately often originates; while such narratives may also locate some difficulties between inmate students and teachers, they do not offer extended analysis of the nature/source of these issues. Additionally, most of these narratives center on college classes in prison, where the complexities of the prison setting are intensified by issues of grading and credit.[1] Because the field of prison pedagogy and literacies is a rela-

tively new one, the complexity of prison teaching is only beginning to be addressed.

Any classroom problems I did experience had all been in the college classes; up until the moment of Mr. Jones's questions, I had not perceived any troubling issues, undercurrents of tension, or disruptions in the workshop that the inmates voluntarily attended and which I had thought functioned so well. Free of the constraints of exit exams and grading, I looked forward to meeting with the workshop every other Tuesday night and believed that the current group of students worked particularly well together; I had tried to create and maintain an open, facilitative atmosphere in which I encouraged students to ask questions of myself and each other. As a teacher who attempted to facilitate a workshop that was grounded in the Freirean principles of dialogic, democratic pedagogy, I had hoped that the workshop could be a space for open, critical, and engaged response and inquiry. Was this uncomfortable question the inevitable result of such a classroom?

Mr. Jones's question made me so uncomfortable because it tapped into the insecurities I felt about my role in the prison, as did the other "troubling" incidents that have caused me to question and re-evaluate my place in the complexity of the prison environment. These incidents did not involve any threats of physical violence. Rather, inmates have made remarks and situated themselves in classroom discourse in ways that indicate that they are well aware of differences and inequities between us; these moments also indicate how much inmates need to understand our motivations to teach in prison and the necessity of opening up a dialogue. As I thought about Mr. Jones's question, the first response that came to my

1. Several prison teachers explore difficulties and tensions in college prison writing classes. Frances Biscoglio, for example, in her article " In the Beginning Was the Word: Teaching Pre-College English at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," offers, in a diary format, an account of the rewards and difficulties of teaching a pre-college English class to incarcerated women. Biscoglio notes problems with plagiarism, classroom behavior, and her relationship with the class. She states, for example, of her class that "If they want to prove they are correct and I am not, they can be as tenacious as bulls—and drive me crazy "(27) and that some students are "verbally insubordinate' (35). Biscoglio, however, also discusses the many rewards of teaching her students as well and also provides a detailed account of a college class in a prison environment.

Philip Martin, in "Literature Lessons from Prison," recounts that on his first night of teaching a college literature class in prison, "A tall, white inmate walks up after class and hits me hard with a forearm flat against my chest" (B3). He recounts his own fear, based on the racial tensions he perceives in the group, as he "walked inside the U shape, rolling chalk in my hand, hoping not to reveal fear to either blacks or whites" (B4). Martin's purpose, however, is to discuss the repercussions of the reading choices he has made for his prison class, not to analyze his relationship with his inmate students. Likewise, Thomas Hruska, in his 1981 article "What Do You Expect? We're All Crooks," offers a series of vignettes of disturbing or unexpected encounters with his inmate students in the various writing and literature classes he taught at a maximum security facility. Hruska relates that one day he finds "a large, red apple on my desk before class. Playfully but cynically, I wonder how any of them spit on it to give it such a nice shine. After the break, I notice that a huge bite has been taken from one side. No one will snitch" (14). Despite his cynicism, Hruska goes on to say that "Whatever the reason, I continue to teach at the prison and, despite the frustration, find the work deeply rewarding" (15). All of these narratives recounting difficulty in teaching in prison explore college classes in prison, not voluntary workshops.

mind seemed far too simple to speak to such a complex question. Why was I there? In spite of all the aforementioned difficulties inherent in prison teaching, I was there because I enjoyed it, because the work we did in the prison classroom mattered to the inmate students in a way it did not to most of my on-campus students. Judith Tannenbaum, in her account of teaching a writing workshop in San Quentin prison, states that she was drawn to prison teaching because "the prisoners responded as I did to poems: as though they received bread, actual matter with the power to nurture" (21). Even though I am well aware of the range of social and political reasons that had made my presence in the college program and now the workshop so important, there was an emotional and intellectual response that could not be denied and that I needed to explore.

The Pleasures of Prison Teaching

Jonathan Jones was a Jamaican student in his mid-forties, and, with his dignified manner and authoritative presence, was the acknowledged leader of the group. He was a faithful attendee of the biweekly workshop, sometimes the only member to show up during the winter months, walking the considerable distance from the building where he lived to the activities building on the other side of the facility grounds even when the January wind chill produced temperatures well below zero. (During the sub-zero upstate New York winters, I rode to the activities building in one of the heated, inmate driven facility vans.) He would appear in the door of the classroom wrapped in layers of what seemed like all of the dark green clothing issued to him by the Department of Corrections. Mr. Jones always led the group discussions, offering clear and insightful observations about group members' work.

"All right, what we gonna do here this week? Who's got something to read?" he would say as he looked around the group. Men would take out precious sheets of paper, some with writing not only on the lines but around the margins, or the coveted black and white marble notebooks, and wait their turn to read. It never occurred to me that Mr. Jones did not trust me or accept my presence.

In the classroom and on my ride home that night Mr. Jones asked me "Why are you here?," I struggled for an honest answer; I found that I had an exceedingly difficult time articulating one. Why was I there? I had started teaching in prison in a college correctional facility program many years ago simply because I needed a job, not out of any political convictions. I began that teaching, the first I had ever done, full of trepidation, not knowing what to expect and not quite knowing what to teach, either. I actually taught in prison for several years before teaching in a "regular" classroom. When I did begin teaching in "regular," on–campus classrooms, I was disappointed; those classes could not compare to the intense and always interesting classes I taught "on the inside."

As I thought through these issues, I recalled a conversation I had some years ago with another volunteer, a retired professor of Journalism who taught a voluntary reading group that focused on African-American writers. We had many students in common. Jack, a man in his late eighties, with his dedicated passion to his group, his wit, intelligence, and clear-eyed but obvious affection for his inmate students, had been given a "volunteer of the year" award (along with his wife who tutored in the GED program) at the facility's annual Volunteer Appreciation dinner. We had talked about the dinner on the phone one night before the event. Jack had been notified of the award and had talked to me about the speech that he knew he was expected to give.

"Everyone asks me why I do this," he had said. "Sometimes our children get upset with us because we can't babysit for them because it is our night to be at the prison. Other people ask me why I just don't sit back and enjoy my retirement. Why do I do this? I don't have any big, complicated answer. I like it! It's fun! The students are wonderful, and I get to teach whatever I want."

Jack's remarks about the engaged, passionate, and involved nature of prison teaching have been echoed and extended by many prison teachers; while I knew that Jack, who had also taught in the college program, did not begin teaching in that program in order to seek out a "fun" teaching experience, one of the reasons he stayed on at the prison as a volunteer was the level of engagement in the prison classroom and the personal relationships he was able to achieve and maintain with his students, a feeling echoed by many prison teachers. Gregory Shafer, for example, writes of his class of incarcerated women that

> While most high school and college students approach writing as a way to acquire the academic skills needed to survive in the society in which they hope to flourish, these unique pupils approach it as a precious gift that can help give voice to their feelings of consternation, alienation, and pain—feelings that erupt in fonts of warm emotion. (75)

Thomas Hruska, even while noting the difficulties of prison teaching, writes that "Whatever else can be said about teaching in prison, it is not boring" (14). Raymond Hedin, in his article "Teaching Literature in Prison," offers a thoughtful analysis of the attraction of prison teaching. For example, Hedin says of the literature classes he taught in prison:

> I have taught *Native Son* ten times in three different colleges, but I have never heard a discussion of it as intense and intelligent as the one I refereed in the Indiana Women's Prison.…[M]y on-campus seminar, good as it was, could not touch the students at Pendleton Reformatory for getting inside *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*. (282)

Hedin describes a discussion of *Native Son* in one of his prison classes: "I left that three-hour class with the conviction that I had been part of one of the more sophisticated dis-

cussions of literary form and technique that I had ever experienced…I am not exaggerating the level of discourse" (284).

I had experienced similar levels of engagement, sophistication, and intensity in both the college and workshop prison classes that I taught. In addition to the high level of discourse often present in prison classrooms and workshops, Hedin claims that for both teacher and inmate student, the prison classroom is an escape from the normal routine; for the inmate, as Hedin notes, "he or she escapes to the classroom rather than from it," and for the teacher, "…the prison course is inevitably outside the daily routine, the ordinary "business" of the profession. None of this constitutes the prison classroom as the exotic other, but it does mean that that such a classroom often taps, in both faculty and students, the energies that go into diversion…" (282). Hedin recounts experiences of prison teaching that have been echoed by many other prison teachers who often keep returning to prison classrooms and workshops that are taught in addition to their formal teaching load and are often in prisons located in rural areas that require long, late-night drives in all kinds of weather. While I believe that most if not all of these prison teachers are well aware of the social/political reasons for prison higher education and literacy education, the emotional reasons for prison teaching keep re-emerging in discussions of this experience.

Pleasure, engagement, and intensity are feelings we associate with our best teaching experiences, and although I had experienced these emotions with my on-campus classes, the prison workshop offered many more such moments. That pleasure I experienced in teaching the workshop, nevertheless, also led to feelings of guilt that re-surfaced as the result of Mr. Jones's probing question.

"An Army of Technicians": Collusion and Guilt

"believed that I was, with my mysterious motives for volunteering to teach this group, indeed part of the system that maintained power over them"

Part of my guilt, I realized, was the uneasy feeling that even though I knew that the writing workshop provided many benefits to students, I had wondered whether or not it was possible for any such programs to exist without colluding with the correctional facility. From my past reading of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, I knew that Foucault believes that teachers and volunteers, along with all prison personnel, are implicated in a system in which all are part of an "army of technicians" (11), whose pur-

pose it is to "gaze into the secrets souls of criminals" (25) and use that knowledge to maintain power over inmates. Is it possible to work within the system and not be part of this "army of technicians?" Perhaps Mr. Jones and the rest of the group believed that I was, with my mysterious motives for volunteering to teach this group, indeed part of the system that maintained power over them. Was I just assuming that the workshop, which I had proposed, initiated, and taught, was something the inmates wanted or needed? I had never asked them. Was Mr. Jones's question an attempt to understand "my secret soul?" My discomfort and feelings of invasion prompted by his question provided me with just the slightest hint of what it must be like to be an inmate, to have an "army of technicians" whose purpose it is to try to peer into your "secret soul." It was not a comfortable feeling.

No matter how much I believed myself to be "aligned" with the students in my workshop and "against" the administration and guards, differences between teachers and inmates are, of course, vast, and are signified in many ways. Inmates (in prisons in my state) wear drab green uniforms (teachers and volunteers are advised not to wear clothing of similar green color) that separate them not only from the civilian staff but also from the rest of society. Inmates also wear their DIN numbers and their names prominently on their shirts and jackets. At the end of our workshop time, I say goodbye and walk through the gates topped with the ubiquitous razor wire, and they, obviously, don't.

Anne Folwell Stanford articulates similar feelings of discomfort in her article "More Than Just Words: Women's Poetry and Resistance at Cook County Jail." She states that "My acute awareness of privilege as a white, middle-class academic, free to come and go in this enclosed space, added to my unease and my growing sense of collusion" (281). I feel uncomfortable, too, every time I wave goodbye to the men in the workshop and turn down the walkway to the administration building on my way home or every time I speak with one of the guards. Stanford, in response to her feelings of uneasiness, changed the one or two hour workshops she offered for women jail inmates to four- to six-week intensive sessions to ease her increasing sense of "unease and growing sense of collusion" (281). Although the workshop I teach is well-established and long-running (we meet every other week throughout the year), I still have an uneasy sense that the workshop offers only momentary respite; Stanford writes that she was concerned about "…offering[ing] only palliative moments, and, in so doing, actually supporting and making the very system of which [she was] so critical actually look good" (281). At times, I have felt much the same way.

For example, the workshop has received positive attention from the facility; we were featured in the local Sunday paper, and the group has received flattering comments from the deputy superintendent of programs. This positive publicity makes it seem as though the prison itself is somehow responsible for the good work of the workshop while still not taking

any steps to transform any of the social and cultural conditions that have brought the men to prison. The group is "good" for the facility in many ways; it provides, as do other activities and programs offered by the prison, a structured and supervised place for inmates to be for two hours every other Tuesday night. As much as I like to think of the workshop as subversive, in many ways it is simply another program offered by the facility to provide inmates with an activity.

My feelings of guilt and collusion echoed Stanford's as I worried about the possibility of somehow collaborating with the correctional facility; however, it was not uncommon for people who knew my work at the prison to question me as to whether or not I felt guilty for working with people who had committed crimes. Why not work with children or the numerous other people who need help and have not committed crimes?

Patricia E. O'Connor, in "Afterword: Rewriting the Story of Prison Literacies" in the 2004 Special Issue of *Reflections*, acknowledges the difficult and complex issues prison work implies; she notes that "The worlds of violence and crime claim many lives, harm many more" (206). O'Connor further articulates the need to confront these complex issues; she writes that "We who promote a new sort of literacy in and about prisons must also face the dilemmas that cycles of crime and retribution set forth" (206). Although the men in the workshop were overwhelmingly incarcerated because of drug or drug-related convictions (as was generally true of most of the population of the medium-security facility), there were nonetheless workshop participants who had committed violent crimes. There is, inevitably, a nexus of difficult and disturbing issues involved with inmate education and literacy programs; however, as O'Connor points out, the numerous disparities of "race, income and opportunity" (206) that exist in the prison population cannot be ignored. Do we wish to continue to warehouse the over two million people, the overwhelming number of them members of minority and low income groups, currently incarcerated? Is this, as O'Connor asks, the best way to address the many forces that drive people to commit crimes? These difficult issues are ones that anyone who works with a prison population must struggle with. Nevertheless, when I sit with the students in the college program or the workshop, I sit not with abstract statistics but with individual, complicated human beings and listen to their stories of poverty, abuse, racism and drug addiction. It becomes difficult not to relate to the person sitting a few feet away from me as just that—a person, not a crime. Judith Tannenbaum addresses similar issues, writing "…I saw that even those of my students who had committed the gravest of crimes were not monsters, but human" (29). Additionally, Joseph Lockard argues for inmate education as a "human right" and enumerates reasons (including reduction of the recidivism rate, the responsibility of the prison to provide "basic needs" that include education, the disproportionate number of minorities incarcerated, and the establishment of international law

that makes provisions for higher education for inmates) for inclusion of such programs.

For all of these reasons, then, despite the guilt I sometimes felt about colluding with the institution, I did not feel guilt for teaching inmates, even though I was aware of the criminal acts they had committed. Nevertheless, I needed to carefully examine my motives for teaching in prison in order to make sure I was not casting myself in the wrong light.

The Seduction of Prison Teaching: The Prison Teacher as Activist/Hero?

Raymond Hedin, in his 1979 *College English* article, "Teaching Literature in Prisons," speculates about why some teachers are drawn to prison teaching. Hedin surmises that some teachers are very much drawn to prison teaching because "it seems preferable to teaching on campus, or at least preferable to teaching exclusively on campus" (280). This was certainly the case for me; I looked forward to the passionate, intellectually engaging discussions in my prison classes (none of my own-campus students were ever so passionate about a text that they nearly had a fight over it; while I certainly do not want students physically fighting in class, often I would appreciate a little more passion). Hedin also notes the passive, career-oriented nature of many on-campus students, (which is descriptive of the science-oriented, career-focused institution where I teach) and writes "In that context, the prison offers—or at least seems to—the lure of the underground, the student as outsider, the rebel who in a literal sense resisted 'the system' to the extent of breaking its laws" (281). Hedin goes on to state that the prison tends to attract a certain type of teacher, "…those faculty not wholly comfortable themselves with that system, in general those academics who have something akin to a sense of mission…about the subject they teach and its potential for changing minds" (281).

Although Hedin's remarks might in some ways seem dated, they do, I believe, address some of the reasons why I, along with many other prison teachers, are drawn to this teaching. While many of us may not be "children of the 60s," (although some of us are, or at least of the 70s), many prison teachers are still "inclined to social activism or change" and have "something akin to a sense of mission" about their teaching that Hedin identifies (281). I do appreciate not only the sense of engagement and interest prison students bring to their work, but also the sense of subversion and rebellion implicit in prison teaching. Stanford states in her article that she, too, is drawn to the sense of rebellion inherent in prison teaching; she defines the writing of the women inmates in her workshop as "an act of resistance" (277). Stanford clearly admits what she brings to her workshop; she states that "It is clear to me that I privilege certain kinds of writing—I love it when the women critique the system, when they can articulate what is happening to them in a broader social and political context than the individualistic one bandied about in most social institutions" (283). Jacobi contends

in her introduction to the *Reflections* special issue that "incarcerated writers and learners have the capacity to engage in complex cultural critique while building creative and workplace writing fluencies"(8). Perhaps we need to closely examine the social justice and activist impulses prison teachers bring to work that involves teaching a very marginalized group of people who may not have access to resources or opportunities to speak.

In their introduction to their collection *Blundering for A Change,* William H. Thelin and John Paul Tassoni investigate what they call "the most dominant narrative construction in education—teacher as hero"(4). As Thelin and Tassoni point out, one of the many inherent dangers in this narrative is that "the 'others,' whether they be victims or villains, have no true perspective to offer to the plot" (5). Even though many who teach in prison (myself included) might identify themselves as "critical educators," Thelin and Tassoni maintain that these teachers are just as susceptible to the "teacher as hero" narrative as more traditional educators. Additionally, "the need to emulate the teacher-hero model compromises the very dialogic methods at the heart of critical pedagogy, those methods that allow students to teach as they learn and teachers to teach, but also learn" (5). Prison teachers need to be prepared for the possibility that "letting go" of the "teacher-hero" model, or the conception of the classroom as a place where the teacher is the authority and the students the ones who learn, opens the door to the kinds of uncomfortable disruptions some of my students have presented.

I do not think, however, that many (if any) members of our profession who teach in prisons consciously think of themselves as "teacher-heroes." Despite the discomfort many of us may feel because of our privileges and the uneasy sense of collusion with the institution we may feel, it can be seductive for prison teachers to believe they are somehow "rescuing" inmate students from oppressive and degrading institutional situations. Surely inmate students, the most marginalized and oppressed members of our society, are "in need of rescue." It is also tempting to imagine ourselves as, if not responsible, then influential for the often powerful and what Anne Folwell Stanford calls "raw" (278), passionate and sophisticated writing frequently produced in inmate workshops. Thelin and Tassoni note that such a narrative "promotes a pedagogy that will save students from a number of villains" (4); there are no shortage of "villains" in the prison environment. The danger of the "hero narrative," however, is that the students become objects, with, as Thelin and Tassoni note "no true perspective to offer to the plot" (4). It is alluring to imagine that the most marginalized members of society trust us enough to share the stories of their troubled lives and crimes, the most private parts of their lives. It is impossible not to respond to the often passionate and intellectually sophisticated discussions that take place in a prison workshop or classroom just as it is impossible not to respond to inmates' intense need for contact with people from "the outside" and

the rewarding relationships that often develop. If I had been envisioning myself as the "hero" of the story of the writing workshop, Mr. Jones's question allowed him to define himself with his own questions to ask and story to tell; his questions, and the other ways in which he challenged me, allowed him to become one of the students who "teach as they learn" and me to become a teacher who not only teaches, but one who can "also learn." Another remark made by Mr. Jones, in the conversation that followed his "why are you here" question, also allowed him to become the "speaking subject" of his own story, a story in which he assigned me a place.

After Mr. Jones asked "why are you here," I tried to express some of my thoughts to him about why I was teaching the workshop. He surprised me by leaning back in his chair and saying, "I've studied you for a year now, and I've concluded that you are okay."

His comment took me aback. I had no idea that he ever thought I was not "okay" or that he had been "studying" me for a year. I was relieved and, yes, even flattered to hear that he had concluded that I was "okay." On the other hand, I felt self-conscious and even somewhat annoyed that Mr. Jones had been covertly "studying" me for the past year when I naively thought we had at least a trusting student-teacher relationship. Obviously he had not trusted me—and why should he? Why should I assume that he would? For all he knew, I could be coming into the prison every other week for my own ego, gratifying my liberal, "activist" impulses by my twice-monthly, do-good, safe excursions into the prison. I could have been curious, wanting to find out what kind of people end up being caged. I could have been looking to bolster my own self-esteem by congratulating myself as being someone cool enough to work with prisoners. While Mr. Jones's question had hurt me on some very deep levels, as I thought more about his remark, I began to see that he had every right to ask it. Who was I to come into that enclosed, regulated, and restricted space every other Tuesday night for two hours and then leave, coming back when I wanted, when I truly did not understand what I was doing?

Mr. Jones challenged me in other, sophisticated ways throughout his four years with the group. One night I brought to the workshop poems by Linton Kwesi Johnson, a Jamaican poet who had been featured on HBO's *Def Poetry Jam,* a series many of the group members were familiar with. Johnson's poems are written in Jamaican patois, a mixture of English and Jamaican dialect. I had hoped that Johnson's poems would open up a rich and interesting conversation about language and dialect, which indeed they did. Mr. Jones offered to read one of the poems aloud and brought the piece to life with his Jamaican accent. After we finished our discussion of the poem, Mr. Jones turned to me and said, "Now you read it."

"Okay," I thought, took a deep breath, and did a terribly clumsy job of reading Johnson's powerful, politically charged words written in Jamaican patois. When I was done, I

joined in the good-natured laughter at my own expense. Mr. Jones's request demonstrated how much he understood issues of language and power and also showed, very nicely, that there were areas where he and the rest of the inmates had expertise and I did not. These instances in which Mr. Jones caused a reversal of "teacher and student" and "speaking subject" and "object" caused me to reflect on and re-evaluate my role in the workshop as well as in the larger prison structure.

"The Secret Souls of Criminals" in a Network of Power

The belief that all prison personnel—teachers and volunteers as well—are implicated in the network of power established by the carceral system is examined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that school in prison—which the writing workshop can loosely be defined as—is part of the apparatus of the contemporary prison system that has changed the definition of punishment from "an art of unbearable sensations" to "an economy of suspended rights" (11). Teachers are part of the "whole army of technicians" who "have taken over from the executioner" (11) in order to "supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind to alter his criminal tendencies" (18). The modern correctional facility system, according to Foucault, "claims to have only the secret souls of criminals as their objective" even while "it is always the body that is at issue" (25). Inmate writing, supported by the existence of the workshop that the prison "allows," functions both as a means of subversion and implication in the system as it is used as part of what Foucault calls "a mass of documents that capture and fix" (189) inmates in the "normalizing gaze" of the correctional facility(184).

My role in this system is equally complex as I set up the conditions that facilitate the subversive writing that paradoxically implicates the inmate in the gaze of the institution. Mr. Jones's remarks about "watching me" for a year indicates his awareness of the need to ascertain my place in the complex prison environment. His remark is ironic in that it is he, an inmate, who is "gazing" at me in what can be defined as an act of surveillance, reversing the "gaze" of the prison by becoming the one who is watching. My immediate, negative reaction implies that I was indeed caught up in this system as I assumed that his question indicated a "negative state of mind." However, I came to realize that I was not alone in my search for understanding my students, myself, and my place in the prison environment.

Help from San Quentin

These "disruptive moments" in my prison classroom pointed out for me the need to more fully understand my place in the multi-layered environment of the prison writing workshop. In my search for a deeper understanding of my role, Tannenbaums's rich and insightful book

Disguised as a Poem: My Years of Teaching Poetry at San Quentin. offered not only a way for me to think about the disruptive classroom moments I had experienced (many of her experiences almost uncannily mirrored my own), but also a way for all teachers to think about "disruptive" classroom moments. Tannenbaum, as a writer in residence at San Quentin prison, is able to use such moments to closely examine her own life, her motivations for teaching prison writing and her place in the vast complex of the prison system. One of Tannenbaum's students also asks her, "Who are you? Why are you here?" This student, Elmo, says to Tannenbaum, "Who are you to expect anything from us? You sail in here…wanting us to open up. You think just your smile and your good-vibe talk are going to lead us to some deep sharing? Think again my friend. What you want is too easy; you have to earn closeness from us" (20).

Tannenbaum reacts to Elmo's blunt words as I had reacted to Mr. Jones's similar comment: with tears, hurt, and indignation. Elmo's question to Tannenbaum is in response to a request she makes to the men, whom she has met with only a few times, to write about a line in a poem by Nazim Hikmet, a Turkish political prisoner; she asks her students to write about what they do in prison so that "the jewel on the left side of your chest doesn't lose its luster" (19), an intensely personal question. In the aftermath of her hurt and anger, Tannenbaum engages in deep self-examination. She is drawn to her inmate students and wants to feel close to them, but writes that "Elmo had challenged my 'hippie ways'" (22); his words seem to her like an attack, a denial of closeness. Additionally, she comes to understand that she does not yet understand anything about their worlds or their lives. Nevertheless, she is able to work her way past these volatile emotions and use Elmo's questions to better understand herself and her motivations for prison teaching. She writes:

> It took my whole ride home for Indignation, Hurt and Revenge to each have their say. By the time I'd parked the car in the garage under our apartment, I was able to breathe deeply and repeat Elmo's question—"Who are you?" Why are you here?"—and hear the simplicity of their inquiry. (20)

Tannenbaum uses these questions as an opportunity to closely examine why her life led her to teaching in San Quentin as well as an opportunity to speculate about the nature of her relationship to her students and the institution. She understands that at that point she does not know anything about the conditions of their lives as inmates and vows not to assume she knows anything about their experience (23). Elmo's questions provide Tannanbaum with moments of deep introspection and, ultimately, understanding; they become a gift to Tannenbaum and lead her to believe that San Quentin seemed exactly where she needed to be (23).

Tannenbaum begins to see that what initially seemed like challenges from her students were actually invitations to begin to formulate a human relationship, something correc-

tional facilities actively discourage teachers from developing with their students. For example, the volunteer guidelines given out in my state warn volunteers against forming close relationships with inmates *(Volunteer Guidelines)*. While, from a security perspective, this is understandable, it is impossible to teach without forming human relationships with students. Tannenbaum writes:

> I always experienced Elmo's insistence that we were two human beings desiring real communication as an in-my-face challenge....I saw Elmo didn't mean to challenge me [;w]hat my body had responded to as attacks, Elmo intended as invitations. Elmo wanted me to respond with my truth, to do my part to bridge the gap between us—to speak, always to speak. What I intended as a roadblock, he intended as a avenue for truth. (117)

My student, Mr. Jones, was very much like Tannenbaum's Elmo—outspoken, articulate, a strong writer and leader of the group. I can imagine that he, like Elmo, was articulating the group's desire to hear my words and my truth. Like Tannenbaum, I initially perceived his question as an attack; perhaps that is the only way I could, at first, understand it in the volatile prison environment where strict lines are drawn between inmates and corrections officers, "inside" and "outside." Like Tannenbaum, I wanted closeness and trust with the workshop group but perceived Mr. Jones's question as an indication that I had fooled myself into thinking that trust existed. As I reflected on Mr. Jones's question and on Tannenbaum's experience, I felt saddened that I did not trust my student or myself to be initially open to his "avenue for truth." Because I did not, I had joined the "army of technicians" Foucault believes that all prison personnel do. It was not until I read Tannenbaum's book that I was able to understand the nature of Mr. Jones's question—a question designed to resist the construction of narrowly defined roles of "teacher" and "student"—and arrive at a much more complex human understanding. Mr. Jones's and Elmo's questions are perhaps necessary in any classroom setting, but perhaps even more so in the prison setting with its enormous discrepancies between teachers and students and the strict boundaries established by the correctional facility environment.

Throughout the writing of this piece, I have struggled to articulate for myself my reasons and motivations for going to the prison workshop every other Tuesday night. I returned to Tannenbaum's book and re-read her remarks about the closeness she felt with the men in her workshop, men she would otherwise never have the chance of meeting, of the respect she felt for their intelligence, talent, and willingness to confront and communicate the painful and difficult truths of their existence and their determination to cling to their humanity in the most dehumanizing of environments. I have come to understand that there is no one single, simple answer to Mr. Jones's question. How could there be? His question, howev-

er, has prompted me to investigate my own motivations for teaching at a prison as well as my complex place in the prison system.

The Need to Be More Fully Human

Mr. Jones's question also pointed out the need to examine and understand the institutional construction of our roles and our implication in power structures. Through both reflection and action brought about by her students' challenges to her, Tannenbaum became what C.H. Knoblauch, in his article "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," calls more "fully human" (125), both as a person and as a teacher, something I hope my students' challenges and classroom disruptions can help me to achieve. These "disruptions" have also reminded me of the complexity of my place in the correctional facility system; while it is on the one hand, seemingly impossible to have any part in this system and not get caught up in it (as my initial, defensive response to Mr. Jones's question indicates), there is the possibility of resistance, as Foucault points out. Foucault states, for example, that "power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it;' it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them…just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them" (27).

Mr. Jones's question can be read as a form of resistance to the power transmitted through all aspects of the prison system. The prison environment does not encourage inmates to pose questions; their role is to obey orders and instructions. By posing this question, Mr. Jones resisted his role as an obedient, compliant inmate and perhaps became a step closer to becoming a human being who articulates his questions and his need to understand the motivations and reasons of others; speaking is perhaps the most resistant act one can perform in prison. He pushed me to see him as an individual who was not passively accepting my presence, a presence I had unquestioningly assumed he would welcome. The act of presenting himself as an individual to me was perhaps the most important act of resistance Mr. Jones could have undertaken, one that was important not only on an individual scale, but also on a social one. Tannenbaum, too, notes the

"pushed me to see him as an individual who was not passively accepting my presence, a presence I had unquestioningly assumed he would welcome"

importance of seeing her students as complex individuals not only on personal level but on a social level as well, writing that "I didn't see how we as a society could do any serious thinking about crime if we didn't acknowledge that basic fact" (28). Similarly, perhaps the ability to be skeptical and frame questions is a necessary step for Mr. Jones to take in order to become a functioning member of society, one that may not be encouraged by the largely punitive prison environment. The workshop itself, as other prison workshop teachers and facilitators (Jacobi, Roswell, and Tannenbaum) have noted, can become a space for transformation and resistance as workshop members write, revise, reflect, and discuss their writing, and by extension, their lives and their choices. Mr. Jones's question seems to be in many ways a natural extension of that process.

Perhaps each of us needs to articulate our truths for ourselves and our students regardless of whether our teaching sites have bars on the windows or not. The importance of articulating them and the naming of our worlds is explored by Knoblauch, who uses ideas from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to investigate the idea of praxis, the "two dimensions of authentic discourse, reflection and action" (125). Neither one alone is sufficient; when both are present, however, achieved through "a struggle to articulate," transformation becomes possible. Knoblauch also notes that "The ultimate motive for transformation is, according to Freire, the need to be more fully human, to participate more completely and freely in the world" (125). Through both reflection and action, I hope my students' challenges and classroom disruptions can help me to become more fully human.

Perhaps I should not have been as surprised by Mr. Jones's question as I was, a question he had every right to ask and that was a necessary one for him to pose. As I look back, I can see that I could have, for instance, talked openly with the group about my reasons for establishing the workshop, what I imagine as its purposes and goal as well as my own motivations for making the long trip to prison late at night twice a month. When new students join the workshop, I ask them to tell the group a little about their motivations for wanting to join the workshop; asking them to guess at my own goals for facilitating the workshop implies an unequal relationship that is contradictory to the workshop goals of critical self-reflection, respect, and individuality. Prison is a place of borders, divisions, and differences; literacy teachers and facilitators in prison need to recognize the role their classes or workshops can have in at least beginning to break down those divisions and creating a space for human interaction. Recognizing that each of us in the workshop may have questions about the presence of others and the numerous differences of race, gender, economic class, and criminality that can potentially divide us is a step towards what Tannenbaum sees as perhaps the most basic transformation that needs to happen if society is to re-think issues of crime and criminality—the need to see each other as complex and complicated humans.

While access to prison education has declined in many instances over the past few years, increased opportunities for access to literacy for many other students previously excluded from higher education increases the chances that the students sitting in our classrooms will be unlike ourselves. It is in these classrooms that some of the most passionate and engaging discussions take place as students bring very urgent and real needs for education and literacy to these classes as well as competing motivations and feelings about their educational experience. We need to assume that they bring these feelings about our presence in the classroom and our motivations for teaching them. We also need to understand that what we may initially perceive as "disruptions" and challenges may be calls for increased understanding and communication. We must take advantage of these moments so that we can become open to the need to both understand our students' human need for communication as well as the necessity to examine our own motivation and reasons for teaching before we can ask our students to "trust us" as we ask them to write to us.

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