

University of Nevada, Reno

**Writing as a Means of Resistance:  
Benefits of Writing Programs in Carceral Settings**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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by

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## **Abstract**

When individuals enter into penal institutions, they often are stripped of their autonomy and individuality. In an attempt to resist “not mattering,” incarcerated individuals seek out ways to reclaim their sense of self. Creative writing programs in carceral settings offer incarcerated writers adaptive mechanisms to do so. Such programs foster opportunities for expression of selfhood, critiques of social systems, and commentary on social issues. Much of the current research in this field concentrates on analyzing the writing that comes out of prison writing programs, rather than directly engaging with incarcerated writers themselves. In doing so, previous research has failed to determine how these individuals perceive writing programs. This study strives to fill in these gaps by foregrounding the voices and insights of incarcerated writers themselves. Drawing from qualitative surveys with writers incarcerated in Northern Nevada, this thesis explores how incarcerated individuals enrolled in creative writing courses engage with writing.

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## Introduction

I sit here each day early, dark, humid,  
 Smell of dust, grime, old food  
 A bath soap I can't distinguish  
 While contemplating how to compose  
 clear Ideas. This crossed-out future  
 A low-end conclusion to lost souls  
 climb through rock and mud water up  
 to your neck existence free to  
 express my trifling authentic life  
 from this steel bed cushioned by my pain.  
 Clothes in a heap, a system that runs  
 better backwards seemingly the  
 Administration wheels it that way  
 And no one can learn how to get  
 Anything done correctly. Making its  
 occupants braindead so their success  
 is marginalized and recidivism reigns  
 Teaching myself to assimilate when  
 confronted by guards with childish attitudes  
 and psychologically speaking with inmates  
 who live here in bedlam where craziness  
 is normal. Welcome to the university of  
 hard. Sanity doesn't grow so easily as black mold.

This poem entitled "Left Out," written by William Connors III, an inmate at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center, draws on Connor's own experience of incarceration. In Connor's opinion, writing offers him an opportunity to voice systemic concerns about the prison administration system. Connors explains, "I was inspired by my time in prison, by what I saw and how they treat us." Connor's critique of broken social systems, corrupt prison administrations, and inhumane living conditions offers one particular motive for why incarcerated men choose to write in prison. Drawing on surveys conducted at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center with four incarcerated

writers, this thesis explores how incarcerated men enrolled in creative writing courses engage with writing and share their stories beyond prison walls.

Literature and writing scholars have studied published writing by incarcerated authors, analyzing their aesthetic and political dimensions. However, we know far less about the incarcerated writers themselves. We lack answers to questions such as these: Why do they enroll in creative writing courses? How does writing affect their identities? What does the experience of writing and, especially, of being heard, do for them? This gap in knowledge is largely due to the focus on studying published texts rather than the writers themselves. Previous literature and research in this field has primarily consisted of collections of creative works written by those in carceral settings, as well as in-depth analyses of select works. These genres of literature are critical, as they facilitate the delivery of incarcerated voices to the public; however, they offer relatively little insight into how incarcerated authors perceive writing programs and how these programs are beneficial.

Research directly engaging incarcerated writers is less prevalent, yet just as compelling. Researchers who have conducted interviews with incarcerated writers have found that participants in writing programs view the programs as an opportunity to regain individuality, voice systemic critiques, and reflect on their own stories. These opportunities for expression and reflection can be both empowering and transformative. This thesis serves to foreground the ways in which these programs impact incarcerated writers in meaningful ways.



## **Methods**

In order to hear directly from incarcerated writers, I sent out a recruitment email to professors who teach creative writing and other humanities-based prison education programs at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center. The email invited incarcerated male students to fill out a survey responding to a set of questions about their experiences in writing courses. These questions were structured to assess the perceived impact prison writing programs have on participants.

## **Literature Review**

Entry into penal institutions is often associated with an erasure of the self; individuality is stripped away when an individual transitions into a life behind bars. In our prisons today, incarcerated populations are often deprived access to writing and education. Following the decision made by Congress in 1994 to revoke Pell Grants, many prison education programs, including writing programs, lost their funding. Now, remaining funds are often reserved for programs that directly address criminogenic factors, such as courses in résumé writing and anger management. Since most state and federal penitentiaries maintain unfavorable attitudes towards programs that don't offer immediate and tangible practical applications, writing programs are often excluded from prison pedagogy. As a result of the skepticism surrounding writing programs, prison administrations often don't get to see evidence supporting the benefits writing has on incarcerated populations.

Thus, the goal of this study is two-fold. Primarily, my research aims to understand the potential value of writing programs in carceral settings. It also strives to bring awareness to the benefits these programs provide. More promising evidence will hopefully incite other prison administrations to implement similar programs, allowing more incarcerated individuals access to creative writing courses.

### **State of Educational Opportunities in Carceral Settings**

Prior to 1994, Pell Grants afforded prisoners the opportunity to receive access to higher education within the carceral setting. However, in 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. According to Megan Sweeney, author of *Reading is My Window*, this act “eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners, thereby denying the majority of the incarcerated population access to educational programs” (2). In the last few decades, following the revocation of Pell Grants, funding for educational programs has often been exclusively contingent on the programs’ ability to reduce rates of recidivism (Key and May). Patrick Berry reinforces this claim, arguing that the value of higher education in prison “has been dependent on the assertion that it offers some sort of payoff, such as the provision of skills that lead to the making of a better person” (14). Adam Key and Matthew May agree that policy makers gauge the success of education programs based on the “productivity” of citizens upon their release. By viewing educational programs through a lens of recidivism, many prison administrations have made the decision to suspend educational programs in prison that do not directly address criminogenic factors.

However, according to Sweeney “the current tendency to discuss penal education within the context of recidivism impoverishes the idea of education” (255). Most penal institutions emphasize skills with direct and measurable real-world applications, such as résumé writing, thus hindering the majority of college courses inessential from the perspective of prison administrations. In other words, prisons are more likely to allocate funding for educational programs that directly address criminogenic factors, rather than programs that have less immediate and recognizable societal benefits. Berry uses his own personal experience of teaching writing in prison to support Sweeney’s argument that prisons often exclude critical elements of education. Berry reflects on his teaching experience:

I saw how an emphasis on the future could threaten to overshadow the work that could happen in the classroom in the present moment. While I do not mean to suggest that learning to write a business proposal is useless, I wish to emphasize the value of contextualizing the experience and working with students to situate their lives. (30)

Here, Berry contends that while skills that enhance prisoners’ employment potential should not be overlooked, skills developed through writing that foster self-reflection and personal growth are equally important. Such skills can be transformative for prisoners, as they offer them a chance to reflect on their pasts and prepare for their futures.

Moreover, with such a heavy focus on recidivism, carceral writing programs are often strictly viewed from a prison administration perspective. Carla Cesaroni and Shahid Alvi argue “though these analyses offer important critiques of the prison industrial complex and the expansion of imprisonment, they fail to provide sufficient commentary

on the lived experiences of inmates” (304). This singular lens ignores the dynamic benefits these programs offer incarcerated individuals. It is imperative to take a more multidimensional approach to the function of educational programs in carceral settings and analyze the benefits from the participants themselves.

### **Beyond Recidivism: Writing to Resist**

It is misguided to assume that incarcerated students share the same agenda as prison administrations when enrolling in creative writing courses. While penitentiaries operate educational programs based on their potential to reduce rates of recidivism, participants often view writing as an opportunity to resist the dehumanization that occurs upon entering prison.

In response to the aforementioned Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, Tennessee congressman, Bart Gordon, justified the legislative measure, explaining, “Just because one blind hog may occasionally find an acorn doesn’t mean many other blind hogs will. We can’t afford to throw millions of unaccountable dollars into prisoner Pell Grants in search of a few acorns” (*House Session*). Gordon’s objection to educational programs in prison was largely financial. However, such images further dehumanize incarcerated individuals and perpetuate their treatment as “members of disposable populations” and “nothing but bodies – beyond or unworthy of rehabilitation” (Rhodes 60). The representation of prisoners as dispensable justifies the dehumanization that occurs in prison settings.

When an individual enters into the carceral setting, he is immediately stripped of his agency and autonomy. Erving Goffman describes the dehumanization that occurs

upon entering prison, “they are shaped and coded into an object to be fed into the institutional machinery” (14). Jenny Phillips develops this idea further, explaining “one is ground down into the lowly and homogenized status of inmate. The newly initiated prison inmate is refashioned in state-issued clothing and relegated to a small living space shared by individuals of unknown history and status” (14-15). In this way, “the prison system circulates a discourse that prisoners no longer matter” (Key and May).

In order to preserve their autonomy, prisoners often adopt mechanisms to resist “not mattering.” To maintain any semblance of agency, prisoners often assume an identity of hegemonic masculinity in an effort to maintain an identity distinct from their captors (Key and May). Hegemonic masculinity is manifested through hypermasculine behaviors, such as “a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth” (Kupers 716). As Yvonne Jewkes explains, “as a response to the label *prisoner*, with all its connotations of weakness, conformity, and the relinquishing of power, manliness becomes the primary means of adaptation and resistance” (46).

Additionally, prisoners often lose their identities when they are incarcerated. They become numbers within an institution that provides little opportunity for expression of self.

Historically, depriving prisoners of their voices has been essential to the structure of prisons. Diane Kendig, author of *It is Ourselves that We Remake: Teaching Creative Writing in Prison*, discusses “how deeply the tradition of “silencing” is ingrained in the American prison system” (159). H. Bruce Franklin also recognizes “the urgency and

difficulty of communicating to the rest of America” that prisoners face (xxi). In this way, writing programs are important as they offer incarcerated individuals the opportunity to communicate with the public and share their stories and experiences.

However, to do so within a politically-motivated institution often presents inherent challenges. Kirk Branch explains, “to identify the inmate as anything else than a criminal— especially as a student, the identity itself implying a willingness to learn, to change, becomes a profound challenge to the prison itself” (73). In other words, the institutional location greatly influences the discourse circulating around pedagogy in prison (Berry 13). There is a conflict between the bureaucratic structure of the prison system and the reformatory ambitions of prisoners (Duguid 74). When these motivations do not coincide, the prison system functions as a source of punitive power rather than a rehabilitative mechanism. As bell hooks puts it, writing is “an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (8). In this way, writing offers prisoners an opportunity to challenge the bureaucratic structure of the prison system and advocate for changes to penal education programs.

### **Writing the Self**

Upon entering an environment of confinement, it has been previously said that prisoners are stripped of their autonomy and identity. Tobi Jacobi builds upon this idea when she states, “[He] is stripped of clothing, of the tools of contemporary communication, jewelry and other personal items, stripped of the many “selves” we value as humans: self-expression, self-esteem, self-worth. To be in jail is in many ways the antithesis of self.”

In other words, prisoners lose their sense of self in carceral settings as a direct result of the dehumanizing climate. Prison education offers prisoners a chance to reclaim the “selves” that Jacobi describes.

In addition, prison education programs, especially writing programs, serve as a form of resistance to the aforesaid notion of hegemonic masculinity, circulating an opposing discourse. Furthermore, such writing programs provide prisoners an arena to resist “not mattering” in an adaptive manner (Key and Mays). Key and May explain:

When prisoners enroll in classes, they are participating in a discourse that produces them as scholars instead of inmates, learners instead of threats, people instead of numbers. Key's students choose to abandon their means of resistance and survival by trading the tools of hegemonic masculinity for paper, pencils, and textbooks. In the classroom, they prove themselves not through violence, but through scholarship.

Thus, educational programs offer a preferred mechanism for establishing agency and self-worth within carceral settings.

Educational programs also provide incarcerated students a space to resist the stereotypes society traditionally prescribes to the incarcerated. Since prisoners often lack the ability to share their stories beyond prison walls, David Coogan argues that scholars in carceral settings strive to “carve out a more complicated alternative to those characterizations and storylines in public discourse” (21). They resist labels such as “violent” and “dangerous.” Consequently, the notion of prisoners participating in educational programs presents them in a manner that opposes these negative labels.

In a similar vein, education can be a very humanizing experience for prisoners.

Deborah Appleman elaborates on this notion:

It is education that humanizes us and [inmates] become more human when they are learning, reading, and writing. If we choose to preserve the lives of human beings who commit serious crimes, we must have some interest in helping them preserve their humanity. (29)

Thus, education is essential to maintaining prisoners' humanity. Sweeney furthers this idea, explaining "writing programs are associated with a recognition of people's full humanity, their individuality, autonomy and potential, and acceptance of them as full members of the larger society." Berry backs Sweeney's belief that writing programs reconnect prisoners with the public by explaining that these programs "can also be used to make visible the lives of those who are incarcerated, who have been an absent presence in discussions of mass incarceration" (25).

### **Additional Benefits of Writing Programs**

Research has shown that incarcerated individuals who participate in prison writing programs perceive the experience as empowering in nature. Researchers who have conducted interviews with incarcerated writers have found that participants in writing programs view the programs as an opportunity to regain individuality, voice systemic critiques, and reflect on their own stories (Coogan). Coogan explains that a majority of incarcerated individuals "write to evaluate [their] histories so that [they] can better determine [their] futures" (21). Writing provides prisoners the space to self-reflect on both their pasts and their futures.



According to Kendig, many writers in prisons come from rocky pasts, and writing provides a space for these writers to revisit “dark places” (i.e. childhood, crime scenes, etc.) (161). Kendig continues on to explain that students who write about their pasts often report feeling “a sense of relief” after releasing their past traumas onto the page (161). In addition, the prison fiction-writing class is “a place where [writers] can envision the future” (Kendig 162). For many participants in prison writing programs, accessibility to literacy education was limited before their institutionalization as a result of poor social locations. While these programs teach prisoners valuable skills about the many applications of writing, the majority of writers find self-reflection to be the most valuable rehabilitative tool.

Writing also provides these scholars an opportunity to reclaim a sense of control over their lives. According to Kendig, “writing fiction helps students gain control over their own experience” (162). Programs such as these offer prisoners the chance “to write themselves back into a society that has erased their lived histories” (Coogan 3). Following the aforementioned dehumanizing experience of entering into a penal institution, writing programs give incarcerated writers the ability to reclaim their voices. Appleman argues that writing is a form of “liberation” and allows prisoners to “become present in the free world” (28). As one incarcerated writer put it, “I write because I cannot fly” (Chevigny).

Not only is writing a liberating experience for incarcerated writers, it provides them with many other benefits. Some writers view writing programs as “a powerful outlet for self-expression” (Appleman 25). However, others use the programs as a chance to write to relatives, friends, and others on the outside. Appleman explains that “many

[writers] choose to write to young people, including their siblings, not yet incarcerated” (28). She continues on to explain that they “view this writing as a kind of outreach or distant mentoring” (Appleman 28). Additionally, Berry notes that writing is linked to “upward mobility and a renewed sense of self” (23). Thus, these programs offer a dynamic set of benefits from the perspective of incarcerated scholars.

### **Moving Forward**

Recently, with progressive initiatives made by the Obama administration, there has been an increase in the re-establishment of educational programs in prisons. In 2015, the Department of Education implemented the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program for incarcerated individuals. As a result of the program, twelve thousand incarcerated individuals have been impacted by educational programs (Berry 14). Despite these corrective measures, prison education programs still continue to lack appropriate financial allocations and resources. Given the benefits of these programs, more efforts need be made to implement them on a larger scale.

### **Results: What Kind of Writing Matters?**

While most prison administrations offer résumé writing courses and other business writing classes, creative writing courses often receive much less funding and endorsement. However, research from this study offers evidence to suggest that incarcerated writers greatly benefit from creative writing. When asked what incarcerated writers choose to write about, the majority of participants shared that their writing is

creative in nature. Writing, for them, is viewed as an opportunity for self-reflection. Most participants consistently voiced that they chose to write about themselves and their pasts.

Writer Sabin Barendt shared that he writes about himself, as well as his feelings, experiences, and history. William Connors III similarly responded that he uses the writing course as a way to examine his emotions. “I write about just about anything – emotions, anger, future, here and now, love, what I see, hear, feel, touch or that touches me,” Connors reports. All four participants disclosed that their writings would fall into a similar creative genre.

### **In What Way Does It Matter?**

Evidence shows that participation in creative writing programs offers incarcerated writers numerous benefits. These benefits include regaining a sense of control, sharing their stories with the public, and participating in a humanizing experience. In addition, these programs allow inmates to reclaim a sense of identity and agency. Responses from incarcerated writers support previous expectations. Incarcerated writers view the experience as humanizing and use writing as an opportunity to reclaim their own narratives.

Many negative stereotypes circulate around the incarcerated population. This type of stigma causes the public to view inmates in a negative light. Incarcerated individuals write to resist such stereotypes and spread an alternative discourse. Sabin Barendt elaborates, “If I don’t write my story, someone else will. Right now, my story is being told from the side of fear, however, I’m more complex than that. The events that brought me to my crime are only a part of my life, not who I can be.” In other words, Barendt

believes writing is a way to change the narrative society often prescribes to incarcerated individuals.

In addition, some participants spoke to the inherent educational benefits of participating in a writing course. Writer William Connors III describes the educational value of his experience:

Education is a way to change anyone's concept of life, "with a little knowledge, one can live; with a great deal of knowledge anything is possible." That's why education is the fountain of youth; with it, an old man can dream like a child. I am a firm believer that with education one can take a different road. Without it, he is left with the same old road. If that was up to me, I wouldn't let that happen.

Williams is not alone in viewing writing programs through an educational lens. Many of the writers view the programs as a chance to improve writing skills, such as spelling and penmanship. William Connors III writes:

I have forced my penmanship to improve each and every time I pick up my pen or pencil. I have now again used a desire of self-discipline by challenging myself to pick up a dictionary and thesaurus to improve my spelling, as well as to find more ways through words to describe myself, my thoughts, my meanings.

Barendt also contends that writing programs improve writing skills and allow him to practice storytelling. Thus, these programs additionally provide academic benefits to participants.

Many incarcerated writers also acknowledge that they write to influence others. Connors writes, "I hope what I write, some day, if not today, will be read by others and make them think, or cry, or make them angry, or just give them some peace." Connors

explains in his survey that he writes to influence others in meaningful ways. He continues to explain that he writes to connect with others outside prison walls:

I am able to put my words down, convey what I'm thinking so others can understand me. The first time I saw my words in print, I cried. That was the impact I never thought I would ever experience. The pen is connected to my hand. I hope someday to impact many with my hands.

In other words, Connors writes to share his experiences with those who do not share his narrative of incarceration. By relating to those outside prison walls, Connors is able to connect with a wider audience. Barendt also believes that his views and opinions matter and impact others, and he writes to share his experiences with those beyond prison walls. In a similar vein, John Jackson McCullough describes the novel he is working on drafting and how he hopes to use it as a vehicle to share his biography with others. All four participants agree that writing programs are a necessary and useful means of sharing their stories with the outside world.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the skepticism surrounding writing programs in prisons, this study offers insight showing how creative writing programs markedly benefit the incarcerated population. According to the four participants who took the time to provide responses and feedback for my study, writing programs afford incarcerated individuals an opportunity to resist a narrative of “not mattering,” improve basic writing skills, such as spelling and diction, and share their stories beyond prison walls. The advantages of these programs are not as immediate and tangible as the benefits of state-issued résumé writing courses.

However, as we can see from the participant's responses, writing programs offer inmates space to self-reflect and process emotions. They also give inmates a chance to improve both personally and academically. Consequently, prison administrations should work to implement more writing programs in carceral settings.

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