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## Between Ivy and Razor Wire A Case of Correctional Correspondence

"Between Ivy and Razor Wire" describes a capstone senior seminar in rhetoric entitled Writing for Social Justice, Writing for Change, which included direct correspondence between students and inmates around the country. The essay explores some of the many pedagogical challenges of teaching and learning in the long, dark and highly charged shadow of law and order ideology. Excerpts from letters by both students and inmates are presented in the context of analytical reflections on the class.

People persist in believing that they can put other people from them.  
...Nobody has to print a manual for guards that the prisoner must be wished out of existence for society's sake; this magic is grasped as if by instinct....Magic: Shake it out of them—the fact that they are people.  
...Has the relation with them been a difficult one? Now they don't exist.

Barbara Demming, *Prisons that Could Not Hold*

I choose to uphold the law as an American citizen. I choose to stand by my rights if they are challenged. I choose to stick up for people who are wrongly accused. But most importantly, I choose to condemn those who are guilty.

Senior Seminar Student A, Letter to Raymond Joshua, incarcerated protagonist poet of the film *Slam*.

This essay is about the power of direct correspondence to establish connections, however tentative and transient, between middle class American college students and incarcerated people—connections that foster resistance, both from within and without, to the dehumanizing structures and operations of America's ravenous prison industrial complex. It is also about pedagogical strategy, about the possibilities and limits of teaching and learning in the long, dark and highly charged shadow of law and order ideology. While this essay focuses on a single college course, the argument has broad application, since the class, like prison itself, may in certain respects be regarded as a microcosm of a society deeply invested in retributive (versus restorative) justice.

The graduating Writing majors who enrolled in a capstone writing seminar

I called “Writing for Social Justice, Writing for Change” were raised and educated in a society in which the magic Demming describes above is powerful. Prisons, much less the people held within them, did not matter much to them. Or, rather, the tragic human consequences of our retributive criminal justice system had been for them, as it once had been for me, rendered largely invisible or, what amounts to the same thing, justifiable by the ideological magic of tough on crime political rhetoric and sensational mass media distortions, both fictional and non-fictional, of crime and punishment in American society. Of the eleven Ithaca College students enrolled in the course only one, or less than ten percent, began the semester with a definitively skeptical view of the criminal justice system. Most students believed that, to one degree or another, and despite problems they associated with all large institutions, the criminal justice system was essentially fair and just. They had no reason to suppose otherwise. Laws were designed and enforced for the benefit of all, and crime was primarily a moral failure, a matter of choice uninflected by socioeconomic factors such as class and race.

It was through the lens of such received values, then, that my students read the following course description (condensed here for space):

In this seminar, we will examine the kind of writing that drives social movements, paying special attention to the rhetorical qualities that make such writing distinct. ...The Critical Resistance movement, christened as such by Davis and other activists in the late 90s, is a broad-based, grass-roots movement initiated and sustained by several distinct groups, including incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and their families and supporters; political activists at large; disaffected members of the bar and/or criminal justice system insiders; academics from across the disciplines; and poets and artists of all stripes. In this seminar, we will read (and/or view) texts from each of these groups and, in turn, write on the issues raised in the readings and our discussions.

As this description along with further explanation and early class readings about social movements from *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest*<sup>1</sup> attempted to establish, the class was not designed as an “issues class.” We would not, in other words, be exploring “both sides” of an issue in order for students to form and express their opinions through discussion, research, and writing. A social movement, as I stressed, moves against extant social values, norms and beliefs, and our aim in the class was to explore the writing informing the Critical Resistance movement and the nature of writing and rhetoric of social movements in general. By framing the course in rhetorical terms and as a scholarly enterprise, I hoped—naively as it turns out—to mitigate hyper-charged, media-driven reactions to the subjects of crime, punishment and prison in America. But given the white middle and upper-middle class ideological predisposition of the Ithaca College students in the class, the curriculum struck many students as

both strange and politically suspect. Strange, because why should writing majors spend valuable time thinking and writing about people who had “offended us” by breaking our laws, and politically suspect because, it seemed, we were only looking at one side of the issue. Through both overt and covert forms of resistance to the course and the material, it soon became clear that students were neither willing nor able to suspend their belief in the fundamental fairness of the criminal justice system long enough to examine the rhetoric of the Critical Resistance movement with anything like dispassion.

My students’ initial reaction to the class was due in part to a pedagogical miscalculation. While I might have begun the course by studying the criminal justice system as a social institution with a distinct and distinctly checkered history, I began instead from a rhetorical *and* critical point of view, which I believed (and believe) abundantly reflects reality. I wrongly assumed that I could ask my students, most of whom were graduating seniors, to suspend their disbelief in the notion of so-called “objective” investigation, and to do so on the grounds that a primary function of critical social movements, such as the Labor and Civil Rights Movements, was to interrogate, analyze, and critique the social status quo and its underlying belief system(s), which was, I suggested, always already and everywhere represented in mainstream culture. (The “other side” didn’t need to be represented: we were it!) Thus, I argued, we could learn a great deal about the system through the skeptical eyes of its most ardent critics. However, given my own oppositional agenda, about which I made no bones, students were reluctant to yield their own political ground, a reluctance which makes perfect sense to me now: I had, in effect, forced my class into an ideological corner.

It was in this rhetorical context, then, that class *reactions* to the preface and three hard-hitting pieces from a *Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis* were overwhelmingly negative and defensive, leaving us all frustrated and disoriented. An early indication we were in for trouble was students’ tendency to lump the different, very particular claims of each writer together in “they statements” dismissive of the whole group: “They seem to hate America,” “They forget that criminals make choices,” “Their writing is bad.” Try as I might to insist on the differences of each writer’s argument—to examine the warrants, claims, and backing of each—they were doggedly taken up as a renegade group of disgruntled, bleeding heart leftists intent on trashing America. I was frustrated for what I perceived in the moment as a failure on my students’ part to regard the material at hand with intellectual curiosity and critical rigor, and many students were frustrated by the veritable can of ideological and emotional worms opened by the hard-hitting, radical critique of American values offered by this group of seasoned critical writers/activists. When crime and punishment are at issue, the political is as hotly personal as it gets, and any attempt to challenge deeply held personal feelings will be met with fierce resistance.

Our emotionally charged and textually *disoriented* discussion returned again and again, like a politician to tough-on-crime rhetoric, to the questions of “choice” and fairness. Yes, went the consensus minus one, bad things happen to people but they still choose, at every turn, how to react. The notion that laws or the criminal justice system affected different people differently, and were therefore not necessarily “just,” as the contributors to *Criminal Injustice* claimed, was simply outlandish.

In one of my early attempts to incite critical empathy, we screened and responded in writing to the film *Slam*, in which black protagonist Raymond Joshua is sentenced to three years in a D.C. prison for possession of a small amount of marijuana. I asked students to write a letter to the incarcerated Joshua who, in his turn (according to the assignment), had asked them the following series of questions:

To what extent do you perceive yourself to be a product of a ‘system,’ or of interlocking systems—a subject positioned and defined by social circumstances, and to what extent, on the other hand, do you perceive yourself to be responsible for who you are today, a free individual whose will and power to choose transcends circumstances?...Have you ever felt oppressed by a system/systems or institution? If so, how so? What did you do about it? If not, why not? Have you ever broken, or thought about breaking, rules, laws, or social taboos? If so, why? And how did you feel about breaking them? What was your punishment? Have you felt, in your life, as though you were treated fairly? If so, how does that feel...to be treated fairly? If not, why not?

The several sentences of Student A quoted at the opening of this essay constitutes the conclusion of one student’s answer to Raymond. Here are excerpts from several other students’ letters:

Learn about the law, maybe there is someone in power (your mayor, a Senator) who can help you. Write your poetry and wait it out. When you get out, you should be able to apply some new perspective to your situation and use it to help you get back on your feet in the “free” world. Kind of like how you talked about your friend out of a bloody reprisal and helped you both avoid becoming statistics of recidivism. —Student B

Why do you get three years jail time for less pot than South Hill (Ithaca College students) smokes in one night? Because we here at South Hill can prove to a court of law that we do not plan on making a lifetime habit out of drugs or self-destructive behavior. There is an unspoken understanding that college students are living it up for four years, while working hard, so that they can get their destructive behavior out of their systems and go on to be worthwhile members of the American community. This is something that we need to help your community realize. There is no freedom without hope. —Student C

It's easy for me to believe in the expression "a victim of circumstance. But somehow I think we are all victims.—Student D

So am I in prison? have I ever felt limited or restricted? have I ever not? have I ever felt free? It is not enough, America, to watch the evening news, fuck, eat and shop. The silence is felt in my chest and it is heavy and it prevents me from sitting her in calm stillness. I am uncomfortable all the time. I am imprisoned all the time.—Student E

As indicated in these responses, attitudes regarding the predicament of poor, non-violent and minority offenders represented by Raymond ranged from unapologetic condemnation to covert condescension to over-identification (i.e., we are all victims, we are all imprisoned). Whatever the sentiment expressed, our letters to Raymond, which each student read aloud in a class slam, brought to light many of the emotional aspects of law and order.

We pressed forward with our investigation of the rhetoric of the Critical Resistance movement, reading and writing about a variety of other texts.<sup>2</sup> Elaborate critical arguments and published narratives detailing childhood deprivations and abuse were dismissed as either incredible ("How can we believe this?") or extraordinary—published precisely because they were rare, the exceptions to the rule (i.e., that people in America are treated fairly and humanely). And facts and figures concerning the disproportionate relationship between crime levels and rates of incarceration, or the racist structure of the system, or the failure of punitive incarceration as reflected in high recidivism rates, all failed to convince my captive audience that a Critical Resistance movement was warranted, much less worthy of study.

In rhetorical terms, then, ethical and logical appeals (testimony, argument) did not win over hearts and minds. If the criminal justice system caused people to suffer, so much the better: that was the point, after all. Far from sparking moral indignation at the way we treat people who break the law, illuminating the unfairness and punitive excesses of the system, seemed rather to strengthen than weaken pro-prison, pro-punitive positions in the class. The scapegoat function of the criminal justice system came to the fore, such that "exposing" suffering (in the forms of injustice and excessive, counter-productive punishment) provided a particular pleasure, an unburdening of guilt, proof that the scapegoat has indeed been sacrificed, our own sins purged. Why would my students want to give up this magical power, this pleasure? Why would anyone?

My plans to humanize the dehumanized by illuminating the logic and technology of their oppression had, just as perhaps many ethical and logical Critical Resistance arguments do, back-fired.

### **Turning Point**

After reading many published narratives of incarcerated people (such as those

found in *Undoing Time* and *Prison Writing in Twentieth Century America*) the class responded enthusiastically to my suggestion—conceived in the design stages of the course but held back strategically, pending moments of intense cognitive dissonance and collective decision making—that we initiate direct correspondence with inmates. Let’s put our concerns and questions about crime and punishment and the prison industrial complex to them, I proposed, and see what we learn. The prospect of direct dialogue, of communicating with inmates in “real time” and through the intimate medium of personal letters promised a relatively unmediated means for students to connect with people in, what had by now become in our class, the much maligned system. It is one thing to read an anthologized personal account of prison life or of experiences leading up to prison, yet quite another to be addressed by name and to have one’s own questions taken up thoughtfully by currently incarcerated people. It is the difference between disembodied, relatively risk-free “academic” discourse, and embodied, personal dialogue that carries with it possibilities and risks connected to any human involvement.

I collected addresses of individual prisoners by posting a message to the Prison Activist Resource Center’s listserv <[www.prisonactivist.org](http://www.prisonactivist.org)> asking for contacts of incarcerated writers who might be interested in corresponding with my class. I received perhaps a dozen replies from prison activists, friends and family members of prisoners, and former prisoners. A couple of people supplied names and addresses of incarcerated writers who they knew might be interested in corresponding with college students, and others told me they would pass on our initial correspondence to incarcerated friends and/or family members. So I wrote a cover letter describing our class and introducing me and my students, each of whom wrote a brief self-introduction accompanied by a set of questions and concerns they hoped one or more recipients would address, and we sent copies to about twenty people incarcerated at different institutions around the country. We invited inmates to write the class as a group and/or respond to individual students and/or both, indicating whether a letter was “Open” or “Private” at the top. In order to allay any fears that might come up from students, parents, or administrators concerning direct correspondence with inmates, all mail was channeled through me, students used first names only, and requests for contact other than written correspondence were politely declined.

Beginning with the opening paragraph of my cover letter, here are excerpts from five students’ self-introduction:

**Kerr:** I am a professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Ithaca College, in Ithaca, NY. Currently, I am teaching a writing class on the Prison Industrial Complex. The following eleven people (see their self-introductions below), all seniors at Ithaca College, in Ithaca, NY, are each interested in corresponding with inmates in order to learn more about the system and the effects it has on the people in it and around it. The

writers who introduce themselves below felt that a genuine dialogue with people on the “other side” of the wall would help them understand things it is hard to understand in any other way than by connecting with people.

**Excerpt 1 (Student G):** Because of [our class] readings, I have a lot of questions regarding specific failures in the system and the relationships between victims and offenders. Many of the texts we’ve read site that certain failures, (whether they be on the part of child services, parole officers, etc.) have resulted in making victims out of people that become offenders. That is to say, offenders are victims as well. While this sn’t universal, I do agree on some level. If you have any thoughts on this matter, I’d love to hear them and a little about yourself.

**Excerpt 2 (Student A):** I want to know about your vision of the future. I want to know if you believe that you can be a productive and valuable part of your community once you are allowed to re-enter society. I want to know why you do or donot think that you can become a law-abiding citizen. What programs have youbeen a part of? Have they worked? I suppose my most important question is, do you think that you can rise through the social barriers of being a convicted criminal, or do you think that you are stuck in a never-ending-cycle of violence and oppression?

**Excerpt 3 (Student B):** Admittedly, I was once a staunch advocate of the prison system and its methods, for better or worse (mostly out of my own ignorance), but this writing class has made me think a little harder. I wonder then, if the already prescribed rehab program in place—namely, sit in your cell and think about what you have done, I suppose—is such a failure, what kind of treatment/activities/opportunities do you think would most benefit prisoners? In other words, what does the system need to provide inmates (and by this I mean those who are guilty, not those who have been wrongly jailed and must contend with the legal system) to make them more stable, productive, honest and gentler human beings than they walked in as?

**Excerpt 4 (Student E):** I have tremendous respect and concern for people enduring physical incarceration and I think that I have a lot to learn from your experience. If you’re interested in sharing what you know, what you’ve experienced or what you’ve learned I am interested in having a correspondence.

**Excerpt 5 (Student H):** A few years back a family friend was murdered in my hometown for a senseless reason. I have always felt intense hatred towards his killer, because there is now a wife without her husband and four young boys with no father. I do however, understand that the system can be twisted, and sometimes the prisoner can end up the victim. . . . I’d really appreciate if someone could help me understand, and talk about this issue with me from an incarcerated person’s perspective.

Of the 25 inmates who ultimately responded to our letter and questions, all designated their response “Open” and many chose to write both a general response and specific responses to various students. I acknowledged receipt of all letters via a form letter (I didn’t have time in the semester to write separate letters to everyone who wrote us), and students eventually responded to each letter personally, if in some cases perfunctorily. Several students followed up the initial correspondence with other letters, and two or three of those correspondences continued after the class and graduation.

While each writer addressed the class and its questions in different ways, all combined personal experience and critical analysis to shed light on the human dimensions of law and order ideology and its institutional consequences. A few incarcerated writers sent pictures of themselves and/or family, several sent essays they’d written, a couple included newspaper stories about work they had done or were doing in prison, and one writer opened a link on his website dedicated to “Dialogues,” which features his responses to my students’ questions and encouraged public discussion. Many of the letters were quite long—8 to 10 single-spaced hand-written pages or the equivalent—and several included or referred to other pieces by the writer.

As a sample of the kind and quality of responses we received, I include excerpts from five respondents below. I juxtapose them with excerpts from student introductions (above) to illustrate just how thoroughly and powerfully, and with what good will, these prison writers responded to the questions and concerns raised by my class, shattering dehumanized stereotypes of convicts with each stroke of the pen. Although I have excerpted relatively short passages of each person’s letter(s), using ellipses to indicate omitted sections, the ethos of each writer remains intact, and I intentionally refrain from commentary, believing it is best in this instance to let the writers, who have precious little opportunity to do so, speak for themselves.

**Letter from L.C.:** [To Me and Class] I am in receipt of your introductory letter and the eleven self-introductions of the seniors in your writing class. I am honored that you all are interested in the people “behind the wire” and “on the other side.” Actually, most prisoners here refer to society as “in the world.” That alone has a strong emphasis when you think of “people” not being in the world. ...In all honesty, I was a bit insulted and a lot of prisoners would be by questions that question my humanness. However, I know no offense was meant. Prison life makes one defensive when they are asked if they can live amongst the citizens of society being a productive human being. Maybe you can tell me why we get offended. [To Student G] As far as the system “making” victims of offenders, I would agree. However, from my personal experience and those I have come in contact with, in most instances, offenders are victims before they victimize others. They are victims of poverty, mental illness, racism, politics and various



abuses. Please understand that I am in no way trying to justify, excuse or support anyone's criminal behavior, including my own., but I do try to understand the hows and whys. ...Since my 1998 incarceration I have been subjected to physical, sexual, verbal, and psychological abuse. It changed me. You see, the sexual abuse was more than I could accept. It messed me up mentally. I did not know how to deal with the demeaning, humiliating acts. At first I became severely depressed. I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder following the physical assault prior to the sexual. I became catatonic. I was left to lie in my waste for weeks. I was mentally living in a cocoon, cutting the world around me off. When I "arose from the dead," I dealt with my pain and anger, the dehumanization, by assaulting my perpetrators. I threw waste on them when they were assigned to my area. I refused to allow my perps to be around me. Administration refused to deal with what happened. I was criminally charged with aggravated battery. It was never my intention to cause any physical harm, but I did not know how to deal with the pain....[To Student A] I too believe in the "ideas" of America (i.e., equality, justice, fairness, equal opportunity, peace, etc.). Can I be a productive and valuable part of my community once I'm allowed to re-enter society? I believe that I am a productive and valuable human being wherever I am, whether in the world or behind the fence.

**From Victoria N.:**[To Class] I grew up with drugs and alcohol abuse along with years of sexual and psychological abuse at the hands of two fathers and one grandfather. I was in a middle class home—there wasn't poverty or moving around a lot, but of course abuse is in every level of society. I personally have been addicted to drugs since I was 13 years old, given to me by my step-father who was my primary perpetrator. I have been in and out of jail and prison from the age of 15 but never did any prison time until I was 22 years old...

As for women I believe we need more work in the areas of our abusive lives and drug addictions. I believe 70% of women offenders are here because of drugs or domestic abuse as victims turned offenders to protect their families. Oregon had no self-defense law. If a woman protects herself from a man's beating her she goes to prison. You may or may not believe it but I know many women in here today for this type of crime. Where's the justice? A man assaults his woman, he walks. A woman protects herself, she falls and falls hard.

I know this first hand. My step dad pled guilty to sexual abuse on me. He did NOT do one day in jail or prison but he produced me and raised me as a drug-addicted prostitute. Where's the justice?

I've been here 5 ½ years with NO classes for my abuse issues, no certificates to show a prospective employer, no way of knowing what to do. I admit we make our own choices in here to read, research, study and achieve our personal goals. I do this to the best of my ability but classes cost \$ and we have to rely on our families to support us.

**Letter from K.W.:**[To Class] Greetings! First, I'd like to thank you for choosing me as one of the prisoners to correspond with. Many of us do have voices that need to be heard. Society tends to forget that as human beings we feel pain, anger, and cry tears. They forget that we are human; they forget that we have personalities and have placed labels against us, when most of us are genuinely good people, who have chosen the wrong roads in life's journey....I am 26 years old, having come to know myself as a Woman behind this razor wire and brick. I am a writer of poetry, an avid reader and seeker of knowledge. My political beliefs are of Anarchism, where people may live in a Utopian society, without control, racism, sexism, classism, and all the other isms that plague today's world. I am open-minded and down to earth. I seek peace and love against this world of hatred and violence.

**Letter from G.S.:**[To Class]:How much do you want to know for real? 90% of the female populations in prison were once victims of crimes. Crimes so humiliating and shameful that some women in prison no longer have dignity and believe truly that they are bad.

In Prison I'm supposed to feel remorse for my crimes. But for the crimes that have been committed against me—I'm supposed to "Get over it"—without even so much as an "I'm sorry that happened to you." I'm not supposed to be angry. I'm also not supposed to cry. Nor am I to receive proper medical care.

The message I've gotten for 20 years is I'm no good—and no one cares. I did something wrong—it's all my fault.

**Letter from R.L.:**[To Student A] Once I learned how, it seems nothing can stop me from reaching my goals. However, not all prisoners find this kind of strength and determination. I am fortunate. I do vision myself working for a prison oversight committee someday. I see myself working with women in crisis, in any given situation that may arise. There are a few things I would like to see change for incarcerated women:

- Poor women, treated fairly in court.
- Incarcerated mothers who are able to have family visits with their children.
- For incarcerated women to receive as many programs as incarcerated men.
- Home economics in all prisons.
- Self-esteem taught in all prisons.
- Parenting classes mandatory for mothers incarcerated.
- Job training that is geared for women (that would mean get rid of welding, automotive, landscaping and small engines). Currently, there is only one office training course available with 27 open positions.

—I would like to see more people volunteer to come in and hold assemblies that will motivate women to do better. It is a fact there are one million children of incarcerated parents. Surely someone must want to help educate us.

—I would like to see people from church groups come and teach a class on home economics or hygiene. It seems important to work on oneself, as well as one's religion.

You asked about me being a productive member of society. I am in a society of 3,000 women. Each day I am productive. I have always taken initiative to get the job done. I see a problem, I do my best to fix it. I practice what I speak on every day. I spend endless hours working on self-esteem and promoting it.

**Letter from J.W.:** [To Class][Harsh prison conditions and disregard for prisoners' "rights"] "go with the territory, some would argue. Do the crime, do hard time. You don't have any rights and you don't deserve any. Okay—but there are dangers inherent in the "hard time" argument, in the idea that prisons should primarily be directed towards punishing offender and become more cost-effective by cutting rehabilitation programs to a bare minimum. The biggest danger is that statistics show that 95% + of the prison population nationwide will be released at some point. And punishment without rehabilitation actually encourages, rather than discourages, criminal behavior...

Much of prison life is designed to strip the inmate of any sense of individuality, of any identity other than subservient prisoner. To some degree, this is necessary in order to enforce compliance and discipline, we are told by prison authorities. Problem is, it doesn't work: you can't strip anyone of identity in any real sense. You can encourage a shift that might lead someone away from self-destructive and unproductive ways of looking at the self and the world, but this is usually only possible if you offer an alternative to the present notions one has. An alternative that is perceived as not only achievable but desirable in that it will lead to a change in the condition of their inner and the outer life of the individual. If you punish someone and attempt to strip them of their identity without providing an alternative, you are threatening to lead that person into a void, into a selflessness that cannot be conceived of. So what happens? The almost inevitable—and natural!—reaction is that to counter the threat to identity, one clings even more tightly to the identity they already have, to what they already know. In the case of inmates, that is the mentality and worldview and sense of self that led them to commit the crimes they committed in the first place. Thus the cycle of recidivism, which has become an even more acute and widespread problem since the longer sentence/tougher time movement came to fruition in the 90s.

**From M.S.:**[To Student G] You ask whether the system itself turns offenders into victims. There are a lot of people inside these cages who would want society to believe that prisoners are victims. I'm not one of them. I loathe the thought of thinking myself a victim because I am

convinced personal growth can only come through the acceptance of responsibility, through personal accountability. I am in this system because of the bad decisions I made as a younger man. I did not make a smooth transition from a spoiled adolescence to adulthood. Instead, I joined a group of friends in a scheme to distribute cocaine. Although there were no weapons or acts of violence, and I had never been incarcerated before, my sentencing judge thought a 45-year term of imprisonment appropriate. I've never blamed anyone but myself for the predicament that I put myself in. And I'm convinced that the onus is on me to make the most of it...

[To Student A] I too am a patriotic American. In the America I remember, individuals are encouraged to work hard, contribute to society, and prosper. In prison, on the other hand, every prisoner is stripped of his individuality. Numbers replace our names and each prisoner is given according to his need. Although prisoners have every opportunity to make their lives more difficult, no system exists for them to distinguish themselves formally in a positive way. In other words, a prisoner's classification does not change whether he spends ten years watching hip-hop videos and playing cards or whether he educates himself and contributes to society.

I began serving this sentence when I was 23, in 1987. I expect that most of your classmates were quite young then. I have forgotten a lot about what it's like to live outside of prison. I have not taken a bath or submerged myself in water since Ronald Reagan was President. I do not know what it is like to eat with a metal fork or drink out of a glass. Although I designed my web site and have written extensively for it, I've never actually seen a web site. You probably find this hard to believe, but in my dreams I picture the Internet; I regularly dream of having my own typewriter in my cell. All of my dreams are somehow related to prison. But I make the most of it...The system itself has not helped me achieve my goals. Administrators may punish me, for example, because I am typing this response to you. You see, technically, typewriters are supposed to be used only to type legal documents for the court. I do not like violating this rule, but I need to communicate and so I do. Administrators will not allow prisoners to own typewriters, and word processors, to them, are worse than prison-made knives. It's a weird system, imprisonment.

You ask how you can help. One way you can help is to foster more dialogue between prisoners and society. You're a writer. The world changes through writing. You can help me by suggesting ways that I can more effectively communicate with America. I don't know how to connect with the media. I don't know how to disseminate my thoughts and ideas to others. When you graduate and move into the professional world, perhaps you will remember my writing and open opportunities for me to communicate with others. I would be grateful for that. If you can introduce others to my website at MichaelSantos.net, I would be grateful. Spreading information is the

only way that I know to help. Because I don't really believe that most Americans want offenders with no history of weapons or violence to serve multiple decades in confinement. But I really don't know much about America anymore. I'm a prisoner in the gulag...<sup>3</sup>

The effects of these and other inmate responses to my students' views of criminal justice and the prison industrial complex cannot be measured quantitatively but, judging from the shift in tone of class discussions as well as other more tangible indicators, they were rather profound. While students' views were not magically transformed by inmates' letters, their expressed feelings and attitudes toward prisoners changed significantly upon hearing their human voices. All were appalled, for instance, by stories of sexual abuse and assault both in and out of prison, and expressed their outrage clearly. Several women in my class voiced strong feelings of feminist solidarity and were inspired by the strength and courage demonstrated by incarcerated women writers who had suffered sexual abuse and/or assault throughout their lives. (We did not, unfortunately, address in sufficient depth the enormous problem and human tragedy of male on male rape in prison). Three women wrote their long final essay, with passion and conviction none had demonstrated prior to our correspondence, on connections between systemic societal oppression of women and the rate and nature of women's imprisonment. As I've already indicated, two or three students kept up correspondence with inmates after the course, exchanging letters on their own time, via my mailbox at school (I do not know whether any of these connections have continued privately). Two of the students in class have contacted me since graduating in June 2003 and expressed interest in continuing to connect, in some way, with incarcerated people. One person was thinking about doing a series of newspaper articles on the impact of prison on families, especially women and children, and another simply asked if I would include her in any future "prison projects," as she had been inspired by her experience in the course (by which I'm reasonably sure she meant our correspondence and the discussions and writing that ensued from it). In final papers, other students wrote on various aspects of the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex with decidedly less, if not entirely diminished, enthusiasm for the status quo (no one, for instance, took up the cause of abolition, while everyone wrote about the need for reform). Topics included education in prison, financing issues for public defenders' offices, prison art/art in prison, film/TV representations of crime and criminal offenders, recreation in prison, Rockefeller drug laws, and capital punishment (which the writer still supported but now with reservations). Most of the papers reflected issues raised in our correspondence with inmates, and it was clear to me through their writing that students no longer felt they were wasting time thinking and writing about people in prison.

In the dialogue created by our correspondence, ivy and razor wire were woven momentarily together, and connections were made where none existed, nor could ever hope to exist, before. The letters disrupted the scapegoat logic made possible by dehumanizing systems of representation and literal concealment/confinement; they, the criminal class, became individuals with names and stories that could not be reduced to despicable, dispensable stereotypes, and we too were made more human—*humanized, corrected*—by the efforts of our incarcerated correspondents.

## Notes

1. As the editors explain in the Preface, “This volume is designed for instructors and students in courses that study social protest from a rhetorical perspective,” and contains such landmark essays as Leland M. Griffin’s “The Rhetoric of Historical Movements” (1952) and Herbert W. Simons’ “Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements” (1970).
2. We looked at texts from academics, activists, and prisoners, including excerpts and essays from the following: *Invisible Punishment*: (edited by Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind, The New Press: NY, 2002); *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (edited by Bruce H. Franklin, Penguin: NY, 1998); *Prisons that Could Not Hold* (by Barbara Demming, University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1995); *Undoing Time* (edited by Jeff Evans, North Eastern U Press: Boston, 2001); *And the Poor Get Prison* (by Jeffrey Reiman, Allyn Bacon: Boston, 1995); and *The Ceiling of America* (edited by Daniel Burton-Rose, Dan Pens and Paul Wright, Common Courage Press: Maine, 1998).
3. Michael Santos welcomes all interested persons to visit his website where, among many other things, are a list of his published books and forums for discussion. With permission of the class, he published his end of our correspondence with him on his website in the section called Dialogues: <<http://www.michaelsantos.net/>>.

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