

Desistance, Emancipation, Empathy, and Pedagogy: The Incarcerated Teaching Artist's Approach to Poetry

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"Act as if it were possible to radically transform the world..."
~ Angela Y. Davis (2014)

The Art of Recovery and Therapy (ART) leisure time activity group at Valley State Prison (VSP) in Chowchilla, California, is a resident-led arts and humanities-based self-help forum that has been available to carceral state residents for more than a decade and is administered in collaboration with full-time, non-custody, civil servant facility staff (CDCR site, n.d.). ART is among the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) longest running and most autonomous creator habitats founded and facilitated entirely by resident practitioners. ART wields a codified state regulatory authority to function and fundraise (Cal. Code Regs. § 3233-3237, 3240) as well as a Warden-authorized mandate to deliver 15-week ongoing cycles of artist resident-taught multidisciplinary workshops in craft work, painting, music, theater, dance, audio technology, creative writing, and film. Since 2019, I have facilitated the Barz Behind Bars (B3) Creative Writing Spoken Word Performance Art Workshop (B3 site, n.d.), a modality I first co-created with my concurrently incarcerated peers Benjamin Frandsen and The Mundo Press, which has since become adapted to incorporate The Pennebaker Protocol (a technique employing expressive writing as a therapeutic approach to processing challenging emotions) and novel breathing and memorization techniques employed by Poet Laureate Austin Alexander to help steer participants through the processing of traumatic subject matter. Thanks to cost-benefit, quantitative, and qualitative studies of the CDCR's Arts in Corrections (AIC) programs by researcher Larry Brewster (1983), the former Dean of the College of Professional Studies at the University of San Francisco, whose work demonstrated the efficacy of arts-based carceral programs and paved the way for early funding support from then-Governor Jerry Brown, I am able to convey herein the incarcerated teaching artist practitioner perspective and describe my firsthand experience delivering the B3 self-help literary modality to more than 3,000 confined workshop participants.

My experience has taught me that by using literature and music in autonomous spaces, carceral state stakeholders can chart a discernable and lasting pathway toward desistance, experience emancipation, discover empathy, and embody the ethical transformation that too few traditional classrooms behind the wall avail (Littman & Silva, 2020). Having observed for nearly three incarcerated decades the encroaching growth of the carceral nonprofit industrial complex (Kurti & Shanahan, 2021), I am deftly aware of how difficult it is for stakeholders to claim, secure, and maintain the physical facility space necessary to constructively gather and autonomously work with common purpose inside the place they still call prison—solving that riddle is one of my full-time preoccupations. Too many retired prison middle managers end their tenures only to shape shift into nonprofit operators in order to double-back into the leviathan's grant pipeline. This move seems to be



made to secure state-administered funding for programs that compete for resources with modalities like our homegrown B3. The ever-present threat of being crowded out of our own facility spaces remains an unseen pressure most researchers of programs never even contemplate.

I advocate for the expansion of resident self-teaching and peer mentor-facilitated programs within the carceral state that harness the arts and humanities to onboard the trauma reconciliation and restorative justice work that results in empathy and recalibrates the moral compass. This is largely because of the concomitant effect the arts and humanities have upon one's motivation to pursue higher education, and the reduced recidivism that success in postsecondary education encourages (Davis et al., 2013). Supposing poetry can act as the literary escalator that transports our workshop participants into a college classroom and motivates them, I believe our work can contribute to modest improvements in public safety. Poetry can save a life.

Can Literacy Equate with Safety?

"As if timeless hell could be captured by stanzas."

~ Randall Horton (2020)

In California, where almost 40,000 of the state's more than 90,000 imprisoned adults fall into the functional literacy gap, the primary transactional academic mandate is attaining a high school diploma or GED. The Director of the state's Division of Rehabilitative Programs (DRP), Dr. Brant Choate, who announced a statewide literacy initiative in 2022 aimed at reducing that trend line, described the students who lack a high school diploma or GED as those people who are "far more likely to come back to prison if we send them home that way" (Choate, 2022). In January of 2023, nine months after Dr. Choate made those remarks on the CDCR's agency podcast, his boss, California Governor Gavin Newsom, candidly told reporters gathered at the newly renamed San Quentin Rehabilitation Center that the state's prison system has "failed for too long," and "is not working for anybody" (Haines, 2023, p. 1).

There is a better way. According to research from Emory University, the more education one attains while incarcerated, the less one recidivates. After finishing some high school, the recidivism rate is 55 percent nationally; after vocational training, the rate drops to 30 percent; after earning an AA degree, the rate is cleaved to 13.7 percent; and after earning a BA degree, the rate crouches to 5.6 percent. For those who earn a master's degree while confined, the rate is 0 percent (Zoukis, 2014, as cited in Christian, 2023). Literature, be it prose, narrative, or poetry, can save a life by illuminating life's meaning, and the resulting curiosity of purpose can lead to the pursuit of educational programs that emancipate one from the mold of archetype to the liberation of self-actualization.

Having served the CDCR's high school program's mission for nearly fourteen years as an Adult Basic Education (ABE) classroom tutor, peer literacy mentor, and skilled disability caregiver, I second Newsom's critique. If the Governor's top-down academic rubric of ABE instruction being deployed to CDCR's more than thirty facilities does not appear to be working, that also means that the public safety concern Choate voiced is not being prioritized either. I can attest to the failure of the one-size-fits-all correctional education model I have observed while working in academic settings at seven different facilities across three different security levels of volatility. I have had a front-row view of the problem as I see it: lectureless, handout-heavy, stale environments devoid of substantive humanizing engagement, artistic creativity, or meaningful student-centered agency. The status quo is not making the public any safer.

Experiential Critique

"There is no technology more democratic than language."

~ Reginald Dwayne Betts (2020)

The brush I wield is not broad by design. I have had a wide variety of exposure to these environments, and there is simply no explanation for the disparity between the student experience that high school learners complain to me about and the one they could be having. Were I to deploy a qualitative questionnaire to my

ABE students, it would likely sound like an indictment of teachers for “not caring about teaching us” (B. Vargas, personal communication, November 1, 2023)¹ and “expecting us to fail” (O. Tarasuk, personal communication, November 1, 2023)²—both oversimplifications of the structural culprit³. In my view, no explanation exists that does not also criticize the apparatus that constructs the policies, hires the teachers, and administers programming that is not sufficiently success-oriented enough to do something differently to achieve it.

In my current capacity as a Peer Health Educator, I have observed how state actors have no real incentive to produce results. In an environment where there are no consequences for performance mediocrity, there is no scrutiny of the under-the-hood operational lapses that account for the functional literacy gap. In prison, student stakeholders have no real voice, tools, or advocates in the arena. There is no public-facing School Board or PTA here. Absent a platform from which to be heard or external media demanding answers from the agency about better academic outcomes for incarcerated learners, the political theater of polished media tours can obscure the truth about what is not being done to improve achievement trends. VSP resident Bryan Vargas’s family will stare at his sentimental graduation ceremony photo and feel proud that he finally graduated high school—but nobody here will be asked to account for why, or how, he languished in the high school program—for nine years.

We’ve known since 2013 that for every dollar spent on prison education, taxpayers save \$4-to-\$5 on reincarceration expenditures, while participants have 43% lower odds of recidivating; the return of Pell funding has created a windfall of free federal dollars that don’t eat up state budgets (Davis et al., 2013). In my view, though, the qualitative value of a liberal arts education supersedes any such fiscal ROI calculus, particularly for the state agencies administering prisons.

Residents, be we students, tutors, clerks, or peer support aides, lack the authority to usurp the strict top-down rubric of ABE instruction or in any way unilaterally reshape the curriculum, experiment with novel prompts, or reimagine the classroom setting. When I once attempted to import my Critical Thinking college course’s exercise on syllogisms into my ABE class and introduce it as a poetry exercise to engage some of my more recalcitrant tutoring students who were gang-affiliated, the Vice Principal objected to my use of my students’ urban lexicon involving “lacking,” “down for me,” and “dissing.” It didn’t matter to him that a noted Stanford sociologist who writes extensively about gangs had published a research paper citing how in volatile urban settings these idioms are strictly adhered to “features of sociality” (Stuart, 2020).

A Principal once nearly fired me for using drug-dealing analogies to demonstrate how to think about variables when teaching algebra to a group of students who were Black Indigenous People of Color failing basic skills math. I wrote “ $400t = 2400$ ” on the white board, but instead of saying “let’s solve for t ,” I asked two of my hoodstar students in the back row to “imagine the n value t represents *ounces of weed*—how many *zips* can you *cop* from *the plug* if they each go for \$400 a pop, and you only have \$2,400.00 to work with?” Without having heard anything about inverse operations—in this case division—or the need to perform that operation on both sides of the equal sign, they immediately sat up, and for the first time in months, engaged, saying enthusiastically in near unison, “like six,” and “six fo sholly.” One of them then asked me, “Do a number posted up next to a letter hella tough like that mean they be multiplyin’ each other?” I grinned in silent satisfaction, while the out-of-touch administrator scowled at me and forbade me from teaching from the front of the Math Lab class again. Thus, I have been forced to observe the academic failure of my peers while being precluded from deploying any of the several nontraditional but efficacious techniques my prison-issued laptop’s EBSCO database heralds via countless peer-reviewed academic journals.

Discovering Agency

“What occurs when people are confined to spaces of willful deprivation.”

~ Doran Larson (2020)

Frustrated with my inability to gain permission to improvise or innovate nontraditional methods within the classrooms wherein I have worked, in 2019, I set out to curate a safe space beyond that setting by developing a community arts-based curriculum that could experiment and shape-shift to meet the needs of my student-peers where they were. Here, I was able to use the many language tools and cultural nuances that establish trust but aren’t recognized as worthy in the ABE classroom setting. The B3 workshop experience I

I co-created and have co-facilitated with fellow mentors for nearly five years is the ART's flagship trauma-informed literacy modality. It uses poetry, critical reading, creative writing, music, and spoken word performance in a group setting to onboard desistance, promote emancipation, and cultivate empathy in pursuit of the sort of ethical transformation that honors the life and liberty of others by centering the voices and experiences of those left behind by the ABE's ethnocentrism.

Our early B3 cohorts described the workshop as "going deep," owing to the acronym for Desistance - Emancipation - Empathy - Pedagogy (DEEP). Harnessing the cathartic power of witnessing, braving confessional poetry, and committing to modeling the difficulty of trauma excavation for others has allowed our facilitators to build emotional bonds with our student-peers while using the testimonies and written works of acclaimed writers, some of whom were formerly incarcerated. When real-life exemplars can be presented, students sense credibility—like when Dwayne Betts himself traveled to California in January of 2023 to perform portions of his poetry for our residents, install eighteen libraries, and embody the work live in the room.

In May of 2023, a Davis Vanguard profile of our workshop effort quoted our facilitators and described how we use selections from the Mellon Foundation-funded Freedom Library to innovatively address the literacy problem by supporting the organic community of poets that emerged around books during the Covid quarantines (Frandsen, 2023a). Using poetry to meet our peer mentor community service obligation, we actively participated in a power shift of agency, counter-narrative, and self-determination. Our B3 team met privately with Dwayne, who, along with the acclaimed writers Mitchell S. Jackson, Natalie Diaz, and Randall Horton, then made a series of generous on-camera endorsements of our work via social media (Betts et al., 2024), which inspired our participants to lean into possibility. They felt seen and heard.

As our B3 facilitator core became increasingly published⁴ and we were invited to appear on free world poetry podcasts⁵, our returning citizen, PEN America award-winning writer, and journalism mentor, Benjamin Frandsen, and other justice-impacted activists joined forces to form the nonprofit Ben Free Project (BFP) and support our B3 creator community. I now enjoy a public-facing staff role with BFP whereby, as the Carceral Program Developer, I curate experiences, craft curriculum, and draft grant packages that shape the programming we hope to have funded and deployed across the nation to replicate what we've learned and to innovate in areas that empower stakeholders with greater creative agency.

Desistance

"Revision is revolution."

~ Mitchell S. Jackson (2020)

We ask each new workshop cohort to write their favorite rap verse on the whiteboard, point out how metaphor, simile, and entendre are often the dominant literary devices at work therein, and then discuss how little mystery there is about the intended meaning of this literary form. Unlike MFA poetry, rap is often defined by predictable rhyme schemes that handcuff the last word of the following line to the phonetic sound of the previous line's last word—creatively confined. We talk about how most hip-hop verses, like those in popular radio rap, pop, country, and rock songs, consequently, are not that free at all, and then we ask each creator to write a truly *free* verse comprised of sixteen bars that we insist does not rhyme. This is my favorite part of the workshop because some of the self-proclaimed best rappers on the yard get exposed as not so creative, owing to their dependency upon the crutch that is the rhyme form. Not every rhymer can create evocatively powerful MFA-style prose sans rhyme. It is our job to create that discomfort and spur their creativity in spite of it.

We explore and challenge their autopilot familiarity with rhyme and interrogate why they think rhyme is the reflexive benchmark for how best to evaluate or judge what they think an excellent verse is. We ask them to consider how—or if—they may have been conditioned by popular music of all genres to prefer rhymes, and we push them to focus on content and cadence instead of leaning too heavily upon the rhyme form. We emphasize the use of words to evoke emotion and imagery instead of sounding like the prior line's anchor word every time. Then we play them selections from the Radical Reversal jazz-and-poetry album and watch them geek out on two-time American Book Award-winning poet Randall Horton's avant-garde verbal judo dancing atop multi-instrumentalist Devin Brahja Waldman's acclaimed funk-ed-out jazz production. We point out that nothing they've just heard rhymed at all and ask them to boldly probe their closed-minded ideas about

what constitutes a good verse and question how this might reflect the way they make life decisions, cling to dogma, follow social norms, or conform. Then it gets interesting.

Our generative, non-corporatized, and nonhierarchical safe space permits the sharing of ideas, communal participation, and expressions of humanity via democratic access to agency. By transforming into our art, displaying it, and teaching one another, we teleport from here, the land of barbed wire and shattered dreams, to there—that place of freedom that is neither static nor held but imbued by all of the ethereal wonderment of an angelic host singing to us lost souls to come home. Art is freeing, and by taking ownership of one's counter-narrative, one can become liberated from the worst choices, generational traumas, and dead weight of imprisonment's vile legacies. Reclamation is freedom.

Emancipation

"Not having the freedom we had is not a reason to do nothing."

~ Wilbert Rideau (2020)

As an incarcerated journalist and activist, I crave exposition—I am built for it. To do this work well, the facilitator must stand before the room, perform, and subject his/her art to the same critique we subject our peers to collectively when we facilitate the modality. I offer you hereafter this brief exemplar of my becoming, embodied in a poem I perform at the start of every new cohort. Part confession, part testimony, this is what creative nonfiction looks like in the societal margin that is the carceral state—a place too few bother to explore.

Siamese Sins (Ghostwrite Mike, 2024)

Rejected at birth—impossible to love this
Empathy vacuum has left me bereft
I cleave to the parts of me redacted, fractured
By a dark matter G force invisible blade
Senses dulled by points of raw authority
Mistakes memorialized—guilt tethered
Chin high, chest out, rage
It's sublimated by design
Separated from my no-name self
Old me in the rearview, a torn envelope
Couple tattooed lips that I don't kiss no more
Still got a pocket full of heart-shaped things
I've broken this—lost n found dragged body bag
It's kinda heavy
My getaway driver, she just called in sick
Reluctantly—I spy replacement pawns
Use caution
We all bit the animal trainer
Overzealous with the whip
Traumatized by the circus
Addicted to the need to feel
Something—not me—not this
Mos def not these masked mascots
With ill-fitted hands too small to hold
Hanlon's razor to they own throats
All things is in they proper place
Except me
Knife, fork, bruh look—I'm all spoon

Dig a hole and let's race to die first
Homie, I spits last
Who wanna go after this?
I just cloned myself
All the fake poets in trouble.
Cuz, they said we'd be nothing
No (thing)—but that's some(thing)
Is it not?
Some (thing) minus the sum of another
Value judgement made by some other someone
Feeling not one (thing) about your son
“A village”—she said it
Takes to make me, we, they, them—us
Securitized
As we descend, velvet hammers pounding
Man made soliloquies
These slick attempts to bend me
With LEDs and subtleties
Inverted meanings burning slowly
Syllogisms malformed against my will
Killing flowers in the soil, from which I was torn
Born—convicted

Many men and women in prisons have responded to intense emotions in very limited ways—anger, violence, or unhealthy escapism. Most can trace their downfall and subsequent arrest and imprisonment to their own inability to process their overwhelming feelings. For myself and others like me, poetry has become that desperately needed release valve allowing us to spit fiery truths without anger, to express pain without causing it.

Empathy

“Move me, break my heart.”

~ Natalie Diaz (2020)

Substantively, there being few “ah-ha” or “oh yeah, so that is what they meant” moments in most rap music, poetry presents a duality calculus whereby writer and reader are conjuring meaning in the ideation spaces left intentionally open by the poet. I recently attended a CSU-Fresno English class poetry workshop held at VSP with Fresno State professor and MFA poet Brynn Saito, who generously allowed the room to critique her work. She described how “the poet and audience were in collaboration,” discovering the work anew with each reading (personal communication). Rap is often too literal to permit what poetry and paintings allow audiences to extract from or project upon them. Poetry is a fine art, for good reason. As facilitators working in the carceral setting, we believe our role is to affirm the acquisition of empathy as that reason.

When curiosity prompts one to investigate a poet's meaning, undertaking that search is the first step in not just literary criticism but the beginning of the selflessness that sheds ego and prioritizes another's purpose. In hunting a poet's meaning, one must become the writer, deduce the writer's choices, and bravely interrogate intentionality without feeling ignorant or afraid of being wrong. We guide that journey without right or wrong answers, aiming to liberate our student-peers from that thing that has kept too many of them quietly compliant in classrooms for far too long. We tell them there are no leaders or followers here either. Given autonomy and the freedom to be curious, equity allows folks to become curiously free to see and feel the work through the lens of another's perspective—discovering empathy.

Pedagogy

“Kneeling at the edge of the earth to set their messages in bottles assail.”

~ Caitis Meissner (2020)

Our first group reading is an assemblage of content curated in order to seed our literary forebearers, set the table of possibility, and inspire. Doran Larson’s pieces in *Radical Teacher* (2011) and *Criticism* (2022); Betts’ interview in *PJPxINSIDE* (McQueen, 2022); Mitch Jackson’s (2022) contribution to *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting A Writer’s Life In Prison*; John L. Lennon’s (2018) “This Place Is Crazy” for *Esquire*; Frandsen’s (2023b) “The Human Toll of Jail” piece for *Vera*; my excerpted interview of Betts and Horton, with The Mundo Press, for Columbia’s *Exchange* magazine (Ghostwrite Mike, 2023a); my “Gladiator School” creative nonfiction in *Slate* (Ghostwrite Mike, 2023b); and my reporting work for the *Davis Vanguard* (Ghostwrite Mike, 2023c) present our student-peers the abolitionist philosophy, introduce the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA), and demonstrate an array of no-ceilings publishing possibilities.

Whether winning an American Book Award or a Pulitzer Prize after prison, getting published in pop-culture slicks and Ivy League literary magazines, or reporting for a legitimate newsroom while still behind the walls, we show them real-world glimpses of what they can accomplish by pushing the pen. Each cohort completes the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) inventory, acknowledges the traumatic events they have witnessed and experienced, and writes essays about the trauma reflections and emotional regulation exercises that involve physically animating and sustaining the four emotions of anger, fear, sadness, and happiness.

Fifteen curated works of poetry by acclaimed poets of note—Dwayne Betts, Natalie Diaz, Terrance Hayes, Randall Horton, and John Murillo—form the critical reading backbone of what is intended to foster a creative writing and performance art symposium. PEN America’s Mellon-funded *Sentences* guide, edited by Caitis Meissner and generously donated to us with the help of Dr. Moira Marquis, Ph.D., the Director of PEN’s Freewrite program, allows us to present instructional portions from that place. It lets our participants adopt the role of reader, critic, poet, actor, musician, journalist, student, teacher, and mentor. Within what we call the *B3 dojo*, the AIC becomes a school of the arts-style environment wherein residents stand on the shoulders of literary greats, internalize their work, and fashion their own narratives. Indeed, when author, UCLA professor, and RAP Lab executive director Adam F. Bradley helped fund the Unchained Voices Restorative Justice Festival in March of 2024 and staged the inaugural Barz Behind Bars B3 Poetry Contest, our poets had their works centered and read aloud from the stage by Meissner and Horton (Colligan, 2024).

Via poetry, critical reading, focused emotional writing, music, and spoken word performance art in a voluntary group setting, the B3 facilitators are modeling the fine art of self-dissection. I have discovered how to hunt vulnerability in myself, detect trauma, face insecurity, allow myself to break, display that to others, reassemble the broken pieces, and do it all over and over again in front of the waves of strangers who, throughout our workshop cycles, become friends and collaborators. This catharsis is the work. Reflection, testimony, and community beget mentorship.

Lessons

“Imprisonment is ever more likely to repeat itself—now is the time to try new strategies.”

~ Elizabeth Hinton (2016)

The criminogenic reality is this: if one does not regard the autonomy and life rights of others, empathy cannot interrupt the offender pathology. Because our mission is to use a poem to short-circuit the maladaptive ethical conditioning that gives way to crime and feeds the apathy machine, the B3 experiment has shown me that using arts-based modalities to prompt confined folks into confessional creativity is a process that can stimulate reflection and ethical renewal. Because reading anything is an act that necessarily subjects the reader to the author’s intent, and comprehension requires relational understanding, communicating and connecting necessarily demands the seeking out of the other person’s intended meaning—empathy personified. Poetry holds a power waiting to be claimed.

Literature can travel any reader from the gray, dank, and hopeless hallmarks of prison's callous architecture to a place where just enough imagined liberty exists to reflect, dream, explore, repair, and manifest an existence not confined by the carceral circumstance—where journalism resides—where one becomes the storyteller (Plata, 2024). Witnessing is resistance, empathy even more so. When we dive into the selfless ocean of empathic sensibility, we leave the ego on the shore. Below the waterline is an underworld of possibility offering a literary baptism of moral clarity for those who have yet to sit in a circle and discuss a book or read aloud a confessional poem for strangers. Beyond the sandbar exists the trauma-informed, emotionally regulated, and self-aware state of becoming that the B3 experience aims to navigate and nurture. When participants reach the destination of insight, find their footing, break the surface, exhale, and stand all the way up, I believe a liberation is claimed. Looking back toward the former version of who they—we—used to be standing on the shore, serves up a healing act of affirmation that rewards the action work of revolution and reveals the distance traveled.

The title of this paper presents the acronym DEEP as a metaphor representing the stages of insight participants climb through en route to self-knowledge and the “made new” end state of change we believe literacy uniquely provides for within our workshop. Before setting out on any ontological journey, a practitioner must know the destination—to make the trek, one must have traced the trail back from there to wherever one's pursuit begins from—we must map the course from destination to origin. Desistance being the objective, only by deconstructing these stages of growth from D to E to E and to P, might B3 represent a practical ladder of change that participants can knowingly climb. Beginning from the bottom rung (P), we use Pedagogy to discover Empathy (E); from there, the grace and forgiveness that Empathy exercises begets the Emancipation (E) state made possible by letting go of anger, shame, regret, and distorted scripts that perpetuate the cycles of violence and generational trauma that drive crime; and when finally free of those burdens—free to imagine a new purpose-driven life cleaved from criminogenic drivers—Desistance (D) can be found, practiced, and normalized. The praxis of poetry can be that ladder that allows one to climb—from the place they still call prison, to a made new freedom rooted in literacy, restoration, and justice.

Welcome to transformation.

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Endnotes

1 A youth offender with a double life sentence who spent nine years in ABE high school classes before graduating in 2023.

2 A middle-aged lifer who spent twelve years in ABE high school classes and has yet to graduate as of 2025.

3 Written permission for referencing and quoting sources directly was obtained by the author.

4 B3 publications included *Apogee*, *Slate*, *San Quentin News*, *Open Campus*, *Prison Journalism Project*, *College Inside*, *Daily Bruin*, *the Davis Vanguard*, and Columbia University's School of the Arts' *Exchange*.

5 These podcasts included University of Arizona's *Poetry Centered*, University of New Haven's *Radical Reversal*, the World Famous Coin Academy's *Ben Free Podcast*, and Instagram Live's *Saturday Night Stars*.

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