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## The American Prison Writing Archive <http://www.dhinitiative.org/projects/apwa>

The American Prison Writing Archive (APWA) is an open-source and fully searchable digital platform that makes first-person nonfiction essays by incarcerated people, as well as by prison workers and volunteers, available to a global public, to policymakers, to families of incarcerated people, and to scholars and students. Though “prison writing” is in its name in order to be as accessible as possible to general audiences, the APWA treats these essays as what they are, a witness literature: testimony by those bearing direct experience of carceral conditions and whose reaching beyond prison walls critically disassembles the “massification” of their state-sponsored and state-founding confinement.

Essays are solicited through prisoner-support newsletters and a call for essays in *Prison Legal News*. Writers request our *permissions-questionnaire* (<http://www.dhinitiative.org/files/APWA-PermissionsQuestionnaire.pdf>) (PQ) through the mail; once signed, they submit the PQ with their essays. From the PQ, we gather the metadata that enables *faceted searches* (<http://apw.dhinitiative.org>) of the archive. Everything that falls within the wide field described in the PQ is accepted, scanned, and ingested. (Authors retain copyright.) Original essay manuscripts are scanned for posting because the conditions under which incarcerated people write are often manifest on the written page. Handwritten essays are transcribed to make their contents fully searchable. The APWA site offers brief search guidelines for visitors, but it does not suggest what story visitors should find; it places trust in readers, and it hands first rights of explanation and advocacy over to those on the receiving end of carceral practices—writers who together comprehensively explicate, critique, and condemn the ideological, political, economic, legal, social, cultural, judicial, enforcement, and historical conditions that have made mass incarceration possible and continue to make it profitable. Equally telling, these writers bear witness to what carceral statehood exacts on the mind and flesh, and on targeted communities. Many

propose programs for local, state, and national change. The archive currently hosts 1,617 essays, or over 2,000,000 words of prison witness. It grows by around 250,000 words per year.

The US carceral state reflects, maintains, and enforces inequality, to the point of de facto class, race, and gendered apartheid. Because of the prison system's sheer size, recent public conversation (and much of academic debate) has been carried on largely by social scientists using quantitative methods.<sup>1</sup> The voices of incarcerated people are often lost amid their very status as units inside a population that we conceive of en masse. With initial support from the Andrew Mellon Foundation through Hamilton's *Digital Humanities Initiative* (<http://www.dhinitiative.org>), continuing support from the Hamilton Dean of Faculty, and a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities program for Humanities Collections and Reference Resources, the APWA seeks to disaggregate this population into singular minds, ideas, and voices. At the same time, reading across essays, we discover deep structural commonalities that bind this population into a carceral metropolis.

The APWA evolved from a book project completed in 2014 with the publication of *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America* (<http://msupress.org/books/book/?id=50-1D0-3F06#.WrQ4kMgh2fc>), the largest collection to date of nonfiction essays by currently incarcerated writers, featuring seventy-one essays from twenty-seven states. The title reflects a prison and jail population larger than the population of Houston. Equally telling, the experiences of the US carceral archipelago reported by imprisoned writers are as cohesive as those we might gather from inhabitants of New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago. This first, modest sampling suggested that the carceral state we decry has created a community whose inhabitants—while officially barred from cross-state and cross-facility communication and solidarity—raise a binding chorus of witness to the mass-scale debilitation of whole demographic categories. The submission deadline for *Fourth City* passed in August 2012, but submissions never ceased. Incarcerated people would not be denied the chance to tell their stories. These narratives of the human costs of incarceration enable and invite humanists—with their highly nuanced methods of critical reading—to help counter the “big data” approach to carceral statehood with an unfolding of big narrative witness. In the APWA, academic commitment to professional scholarship and public activism can join in a project that removes scholars from the roles of leading voices and into the work of secondary witnesses facilitating the labor of the organic intellects now burgeoning among victims of social injustice. This includes reading the testimony of prison workers to understand

how they conceive of their roles and practices inside. The history of failed attempts to affect prison conditions is partly a history of failure to understand how and why prison workers refuse or find themselves unable to translate even existing regulations into daily practice. These blue-collar workers materially shape the day-to-day conditions in which incarcerated people live, and they are damaged in turn, dying over a decade earlier than other Americans—not because of stabbing or beating but because of epidemic levels of hypertension, alcoholism, and suicide.<sup>2</sup> Writing itself is an act of resistance by incarcerated people. Part of that resistance entails unveiling how the US carceral state effectively seeks or requires the dehumanization of all who live or work inside.

Unlike print volumes, whose editors assign essays to fixed categories, the APWA allows visitors to curate their own collections based on prison location, author names, and on authors' voluntary self-identification by race, age at conviction, religion, and gender, and by the layering of such designations. On the site, readers can also transcribe handwritten essays into fully searchable documents. They can thus take part in transforming the words of those confined in institutions committed to the silencing of America's fourth-largest metropolis into the witness of those best positioned to articulate and critique the deeply personal and collective suffering exacted by the current legal order. By hosting a living, growing, and inclusive literature of prison witness, the APWA hopes to show the service that the digital humanities can render to attempts to create a humane, just, and democratic society.

## Notes

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1. Jonathan Simon, "Beyond the Panopticon: Mass Imprisonment and the Humanities," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 6.3 (2010): 327–40.
2. F. Cheek and M. D. S. Miller, "Reducing Staff and Inmate Stress," *Corrections Today* 44.5 (1982): 72–76, 78.