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Charles Darwin University

## About Outreach

### Prison transformation through creative writing design from the Northern Territory

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## FROM THE NORTHERN TERRITORY . . .

*About Outreach: Prison Transformation through Creative Writing Design*

ADELLE SEFTON-ROWSTON

The YWrite project investigates the role of creative writing in prisons through a state-of-the-art prison education program designed specifically for incarcerated women and children in the Northern Territory. The workshops teach incarcerated students how to express themselves through creative writing in various forms of prison prose, graffiti art, and storytelling. Graffiti constitutes a special genre of writing that has been deployed by prisoners to reflect on their circumstance, to protest their penal incarceration, or even to transform their understanding. Because “graffiti” remains unconstrained by traditional writing conventions (of spelling, grammar, and punctuation), such writing provides a space for resistant writers or those of lower literacy levels to write intuitively. A writer of graffiti can articulate messages with a sense of urgency, uninhibited by conventional expectations of normative writing. The aims of the project are to foster motivation and self-efficacy through creativity, which in turn can lead to improved self-image and reduced emotional stress, an increase in literacy, and more postrelease opportunities. A major outcome of the program will allow detainees to share *their* “stories” through the publication or exhibition of their work, which will in turn contribute insights for society’s understanding of effective prison arts programs and the effects of writing to transform.

Why is this project important to the Northern Territory? In 2016, the Four Corners program “Australia’s Shame” revealed the ongoing abuse of Indigenous youth in Darwin’s Don Dale Youth

Detention Centre and sparked many reasons why a penal system that does not rehabilitate at-risk Indigenous people should be completely transformed, if not abolished. Footage from the program showed children as young as twelve years old being punished with the use of restraint chairs, covered in spit-hoods, and locked up in isolation cells for indefinite periods of time. Such cruel and archaic forms of punishment have not far progressed since the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe, when criminals were punished with infliction and discomfort to their bodies through humiliation—or, to a worse extent, maimed, flogged, or sentenced to death. In Australia, Ronald Ryan was the last man to be executed at Pentridge Prison, and it was only in 1967. Yet even after the thirtieth anniversary of the Royal Commission into the Aboriginal deaths in custody, there remains a lack of willingness to transform prisons into places of support and rehabilitation for those who are incarcerated (who are mostly victims of domestic violence, the poorest of the poor, and those suffering from mental illness). The absence of a model of care to transform prisons in Australia points to a gap in national consciousness regarding the humanity of those who are incarcerated.

So why a creative arts program? Since the abuse of Indigenous children in Darwin’s Done Dale Detention Centre was exposed, several fiction books on the theme of Indigenous incarceration in Australia have been published, including Kim Scott’s *Taboo*, Paul Collis’s *Dancing Home*, and some of the stories in Tony Birch’s *Common People*. Such texts include the bitter fear of an alleged offender being chased by police authorities and the appalling circumstances of incarceration once caught. Yet these stories also show how the grit and determination of a few characters can transform prisons into places of colonial freedom

when language and culture are strong, when there are opportunities to write, to share stories, and to empower oneself in preparation for release on the outside.

To write is one of the most empowering acts of rebellion one can take—whether in the form of a novel or as graffiti written on a concrete wall. To write is to protest by creating the new formation of words in a different order to realize something new. Graffiti has a broad yet unique readership: it is not always read by choice, but nonetheless it has a fluid and encompassing range of readers—it is for everybody. The writing of graffiti is not an autonomous or mono act but can speak to many people in various ways. In prisons, for example, graffiti may communicate with inmates, prison staff, or perhaps even tourists, if the text survives long enough. Graffiti may become part of a literary monument appearing in public for others to see yet staining architecture in such a way that it disrupts material structures: think of the pink nail polish at the old Gaol of Newcastle in Australia, for example—gesturing toward the outlawing of same-sex marriage.

Can graffiti writing be structurally taught? Graffiti is a raw and personal writing form that defies writing conventions without redress or editing. That is its necessary worth and function. It can be illegible but interesting, or it can be literate yet meaningless and boring. But it is the story of the writer and why they write, which is always the most compelling. Paulo Freire proved that teaching literacy and teaching social justice go hand in hand. He is one of the most prolific educators of the twentieth century and the founder of the critical pedagogy theory. Freire is remembered mostly for the vital role he played in developing a highly successful literacy campaign in Brazil during the early 1960s and for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which explains how critical pedagogy is not concerned with teaching to the “test” but as a practice of freedom.

Students thus become informed citizens who participate in the civic imagination by becoming self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live. The purpose of an education for freedom is not to up-skill students for the labor market necessarily but to inform an ever-evolving substantive democracy. Writing and thinking are therefore always a political struggle that, like graffiti, requires courage to challenge the status quo—making institutions appear ugly, flawed, and grotesque. The case in point is that to learn to write from within (and about) prisons is to better understand the effects of punitive punishment on the human spirit.

Creative writing has many therapeutic benefits and provides opportunities to express emotions and imagine alternate realities, even under harsh and enduring circumstances. In response to the atrocities that occurred at Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in 2016 and the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory, a group of academics at Charles Darwin University (CDU) are developing a creative writing program for women and children in prisons in the Northern Territory. The project is inspired by Dylan Voller’s prison graffiti, seen on the Four Corners program, raising questions about the purpose of graffiti for one’s self-preservation and self-esteem. Moreover, the carving of Dylan’s name on the walls of his isolation cell raises questions about how graffiti and other forms of prison writing may serve as indexical witnesses to unjust confinement.

Dylan Voller’s graffiti makes literal a place to locate a writing program in the Northern Territory. Since his release from prison, Dylan has gone on to publish poetry in *Honi Soit* that reflects on his treatment in Don Dale, and in “Justice for Youth,” he writes, “I have a lot of questions I really want answered. Like why weren’t my first

cry's out for help ever answered." Such a topic informs "poetry as witness" and invites others to respond when reading it. The Royal Commission's report into the treatment of youth in detention states that the importance of transparency in highly secured places is necessary for prison reform: "Oversight is an important tool in monitoring a 'behind closed doors' environment, in which there is always the potential for staff to abuse their power against the vulnerable" (21). Writing like Dylan's poem in *Honi Soit* contributes to such measures of oversight, making readers and community members "on guard" so these atrocities are remembered and never happen again.

It is important that Indigenous mothers write and tell their stories from behind bars too. In a recent issue of *Meanjin*, Indigenous author Alexis Wright argues (in response to the atrocities in Darwin's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre) that the "over jailed" and "over policed Northern Territory" is "linked to the national narrative, to story-making, to the way that stories are told, to keep the status quo in place." She asks, "What can I do as a writer?" and "Why do I write at all?" Wright's public response inspires the name of CDU's prison writing project: YWrite—a catch cry that summarizes the central purpose of providing a program for writers who are vulnerable yet must write because they are responsible for the next generation.

The most significant benefits of the prison writing program will be for the students to participate in graffiti writing to explore who they are—what is important to them—and to develop an artistic relationship to the world as a "free" person with the possibility to heal the world in ways that exceed far beyond their time of incarceration. The YWrite program offered through CDU will help students understand how

storytelling can inform one's own changing identity in a social and political world. The impact of the program will potentially contribute to both attitudinal and psychological growth in the students but also improvements to their general literacy and development of creative writing tools. With these tools, perhaps those who imagine a different life from behind bars are best placed to imagine a whole new way of being without prisons.

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Adelle Sefton-Rowston is three-time winner of the Northern Territory Literary Awards Essay Prize. She lectures in literary studies and creative writing at Charles Darwin University and specializes in the essay form to analyze literature and culture. Her monograph *Politics and Poetics: Race Relations and Reconciliation in Australian Literature* is forthcoming from Peter Lang. Adelle is president of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association (AULLA). She lives on Larrakia country in the Northern Territory, where sovereignty was never ceded.