

On Maggie Shelledy's Rhetorical Agency and Resilient Dwelling:
One Incarcerated Individual's Experience

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Scholars have long debated the best way to educate the prison population in order to prepare those incarcerated for reentry and, in turn, reduce recidivism. While some believe that academic writing classes in carceral settings help because they ignite transformation through quiet study, reflection, and contemplation, scholars such as Maggie Shelledy do not believe this is accurate. In "If It Hadn't Been for Writing, I Think I Would Have Lost My Mind: Resilient Dwelling and Rhetorical Agency in Prison Writing," Shelledy examines how rhetorical agency both inside and outside the writing classroom helps inmates with dignity recognition, relationship and identity formation, and surviving in prison; moreover, she implies that the acquisition of rhetorical agency and associated skills helps incarcerated individuals successfully re-enter society. I agree with Shelledy that the role of higher education in the lives of incarcerated students is less about reflection within the classroom experience and more about the relational dynamics that exist both within and beyond the classroom because my experience in the Department of Corrections confirms it.

Major components of resilient dwelling include loving relationships, homemaking, and dignity recognition. Shelledy notes that in previous rhetorical scholarship, community building and relationships are often mentioned as "happy byproducts of the work of the class" (4). As a writing instruction studies scholar, Shelledy urges those in her professional field to recognize the ways incarcerated student writers already utilize their influence, their writing skills, and their relational ways of being to "live" and fight social death (3). She hints at the true objective of the prison classroom, which is to win the battle against social death. In other words, there are two

antithetical ways of being in prison: (1) to “hold on[to] and (2) to ‘live’”(11) or to accept social death; everything one does in prison helps one to either “hold on” or contributes to one’s social death. There is no middle ground, no grey area. Social death’s material dimension is the threat of violence, humiliation, and alienation (9) so often described and seen in carceral literature and movies, but it is also the “belittling” (9) and “cookie cutter” (9) treatment as well. Shelledy clearly has learned from her case study subjects and understands how prison dynamics influence the psyche and all the forces in play within and beyond the classroom. Some would say, in slang, that Shelledy has been “schooled.” Below are my experiences on how I have been “schooled” in how to dwell at two Correctional Centers.

Living in prison is like living in a small village. The gossip and “ambient rhetoric” spreads quickly, and often the officers are the last to know. Shelledy states

The ambient rhetoric of the prison includes elements of architectural design, disgusting food, strict habits of relations, discourse about incarceration and incarcerated people, and more, but it cannot be reduced to a simple aggregation of these elements. Ambient rhetoric names a weaving together to produce the conditions of habitation and habituation for incarcerated people, that is, how they constitute and are constituted by an environment whose organizing principle is alienation (10).

This ambient rhetoric is not limited to oral conversations but is contained in mail called “kites” which are carefully folded into palm-sized cubes and triangles. They are held together with illegally obtained tape or labels from shampoo and lotion bottles. The recipient’s name and housing unit number is carefully written on the outside of the kite. These notes are lifelines and an encouragement to friends to “hold on.” They contain advice, the latest gossip, and the latest surveillance tactics that are being used. They contain who has finally reached their out dates and

also contain celebratory greetings of birthdays and milestones reached. Inmates with jobs that allow extra movement have a privilege and an obligation to pass these kites to inmates that live on the housing unit a certain kite's recipient lives on. Kites may change hands three to five times before arriving at their destination. It becomes a challenge and an accomplishment to pass kites without getting "popped off" or caught. Many inmates realize these kites may be the only mail that many ladies get as they are either estranged from family or their family is deceased. The prison classroom is a main hub for the passing of these kites and "mail" is exchanged before and after class.

Relationships are practiced, refined, built up, and broken down within the pages of these kites; in other words: inmates are "writing as a practice of relating" (Boyle 2015, 209). Lesbian relationships, friendships, and unfortunately, all too often, family bonds are maintained through kites. Within these loving, messy, definitely entangled, emerging and growing relationships, identities are formed. Often kites contain these "risky accounts" that Boyle speaks of, with younger inmates trying on different ways of being (2015, 210). What emerges from these kites is a sense of self; "a sense of self that depends on the recognition of love of another (Shelledy, 2019, 14). This gazing outward toward another while reading and writing letters with other beloved inmates in the same trenches is just as transformative and, perhaps, more so than the gazing inward of self-reflective writing.

My first experience with rhetoric in the locked-up environment was in a county jail. There was a lady in the cell next to mine who asked me multiple times in the day on how to spell words. I spelled her words and she in return gave me advice on prison. I asked her one day if I will be "Ok" in prison. She looked at me surprised for asking such a question, and she responded simply: "You can spell. You will be fine." I thought her reassurance to me was bizarre: how does spelling

have anything to do with surviving in prison? She was correct. People who have rhetoric skills are valued, people who give others a voice are protected. I have helped ladies write letters to their children, to their victims, to their dying parents, to their lawyers, and to their lovers. I have read letters to the illiterate and helped them understand “big” words. In turn, I have received sound legal advice through kites and have received support letters for my clemency. I have helped ladies advocate for medical care all through the kite system. It is well known that even the most horrific prison camps in history, “love rhetoric” (Shelledy, 2019, 15) survives and it is surviving in IDOC.

I have read that psychologists have researched how long it takes for an inmate to accept a long sentence, and these studies show that it takes 5-7 years for an inmate to “settle down” or accept their incarceration and use their time productively. Sadly, these studies are accurate as it took me seven years to accept my sentence. Getting a long sentence is traumatic; younger incarcerated individuals “act out,” and older inmates are troubled by insomnia and depression. A large part of accepting a prison sentence is taking steps to making a home in prison.

Homemaking is “crafting lives that matter” (Shelledy, 2019, 18) and this crafting requires making connections. In explaining to a Polish friend on a visit that I was establishing networks and becoming more comfortable in prison, I told her: “I know someone in clothing that will make sure I have the better pants and coat. I know someone at Commissary and when they are out of stock on an item, my friend will find a decent substitute for me. I know someone at property who could get me a ‘real’ pen. This neighbor laughed and looked at me proudly. She said “this is how it was in communist Poland. You have to learn how to do this to survive. We had to know someone at the Butchers, at the grocers, at the hardware store, at the post office, and at the department store.” I realized then this democratic nation punishes with communism, and I determined I would work to “make a home” and “to hold on.”

Homemaking is, therefore, “the ways people create meaningful lives from within the daily denial of their humanity” (Shelledy, 2019, 12). I often consider the prophet Jeremiah exhorting his fellow Israelites to accept their exile and to make a home in Babylon, and as Thomas Rickert states, “‘home’ must still be sought, without perhaps knowing in advance precisely what that will be” (2013, 242). Homemaking traditionally includes the domestic arts of cooking, sewing, and decorating but it also includes nurturing each other and oneself. Throughout time, food has been used to offer comfort. The creativity in how inmates use commissary which are basically convenience store items to create delicious meals still stuns me. There has been many a burrito exchanged after class to nourish a friend. Prison cookbooks have emerged to give the public an idea of the culture and cooking within the walls. I am currently working on such a prison cookbook with stories for a parole Illinois fundraiser. Prison food is the urban peasant food, and it is a joy to make something from nothing to nourish others and yourself. Creating teddy bears out of socks, colorful t-shirts, hoodies, and better fitting shorts are all illegal but bring much happiness to the recipients. Making a bouquet of flowers from toilet tissue is a thoughtful gift in here. Handmade gifts make a home and are especially cherished in here as we understand the risks and the costs incurred to make the item. Another poignant way I used the prison classroom to make a home is when I went to class and collected coloring pages from multiple ladies for a mentally ill wheelchair bound inmate. I would read to her, and we would color to break up the day. When we were done coloring our different pictures, I would ask her on which of the three inner walls would she like to place the colored pictures on. She enjoyed pictures of cats, birds, quilts, landscapes, and Bible verses. After a few months of doing this, the inner walls were covered and delighted both of us. The pictures and the coloring helped this woman tolerate and fight the voices of the schizophrenia. Alas, one day I came to her cell and found all the pictures torn down. It mattered little that these

pictures helped her and were only on interior walls. All rules must be enforced equally, and the rule is that nothing can be taped or pasted on the walls, not even a family photo. This rule is still enforced to this day. The system tries to destroy homemaking, but they cannot destroy the memories and love-rhetoric that were made.

The kites and all the homemaking are quietly intertwined with the prison classroom, but the instructors are often unaware of these linkages. However, instructors often are aware that dignity recognition goes on within and beyond the classroom gives people structure at making a life within prison. I, like Shelledy's case subject Saul, started taking classes "to get off the wing" (2019, 13). I soon realized that school was key to my adaptation to the very foreign environment of prison. I spent much of my time in my twenties in classrooms and libraries; being in a prison classroom helped anchor me. Like Saul, the classroom material itself did nothing for me; however, it gave my day structure and a purpose. I desperately needed this structure during my first five years in prison. When I first arrived in prison, I vowed to myself that prison was not going to change the core of who I am. I wanted to continue to be of service to others, without fully recognizing it. I resisted social death through affirmation and care of roommates and other inmates (2019, 15), and like Saul, I felt "being even with everyone, allowing them to feel like there's a place for them" (1029, 13) was my way to fight back at the injustice done to me and the alienation.

My current roommate and I have been encouraging each other throughout the one-credit graduate-level writing course we are currently taking to prepare us for courses in our major that we will subsequently enroll in. We read parts of our assignments to each other, especially when we get "stuck," and by doing this we practice recognition and love-rhetoric. Shelledy recognizes this "mundane but resistant form of rhetorical action of 'embracing [oneself]' by extending oneself to others is the result of rhetorical agency that emerges not so much from conscious reflection and

rhetorical savvy, as in the liberal humanist framing, but through procedural embodied engagement with one's environment" (2019, 13).

The goal in the academic classroom is "to express oneself in a manner of total openness and without fear of retribution for expressing whatever opinion one has" (Shelledy, 2019, 17). However, the prison makes this especially arduous by "creating rifts" between incarcerated individuals (Shelledy, 2019, 10). Shelledy notes that "the relationship between the work of prison educators and the oppressive apparatus they hope to resist is made up of feedback loops that the liberal humanist conception of rhetorical agency is ill-equipped to fully address" (2019, 8). The allusion that prison is a small world communist village is not an exaggeration, and prison staff use certain inmates as informants and in a manner that would have made the Stasi, the communist East German police, proud. There is a symbiotic relationship between outside teachers, prison staff, and administrators to create new educational opportunities but also to create new opportunities for surveillance (Rodriguez, 2006, 94). There is in every prison college classroom an inmate who may liberally twist facts and report the goings-on to administration. These inmates have also made a "home" in prison, but their perverted Stockholm Syndrome has made them go to the dark side. These ladies are Pharisees and possibly wolves in sheep's clothing. Intrigue surrounds them and instructors are often unaware. Programs in male facilities most likely do not have this undercurrent as the men have a foundation of brotherhood, loyalty, and gangs within that prison that the women and culture here do not have. These women will sow seeds of mistrust and destroy if they feel they are not given the attention they feel they deserve or are owed and often prison staff are unaware of their personal motives and jealousies and, thus, become pawns in their fiasco. Making loved ones and those that work for our good aware of these possible wolves among us is part of preserving

one's own and other's dignity as well as doing two simultaneous things at once: making a home but never forgetting where one is (Shelledy, 2019, 12).

My above-detailed experiences help put some flesh on Shelledy's paper on resilient dwelling and prison writing. I agree with her that inmates are tenacious and resilient, and their ambient rhetoric and way of being "does not support a kind of introspective autonomous model of subjectivity and rehabilitation" (2019, 17). Her new focus on how rhetoric is a major component of resilience is refreshing and she truly understands that resilience is a "way of life lived against the horizon of social death" (Shelledy, 2019, 12). Writing instruction for marginalized people should recognize the rhetorical agency that already exists within the population (Shelledy, 2019, 10) so, at the very least deficit models and patronizing view viewpoints will no longer influence the lens through which incarcerated student writers are viewed. "Being woke" to the environment academic classes are in and how incarcerated individuals "hold on" is key to making the classroom experience, the writing assignments, and the relational dynamics successful and transformative.

Bibliography

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