

2005

Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror [book review]

Lisa M. Tillmann Ph.D.
Rollins College, ltillmann@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Published In

Tillmann-Healy, Lisa M. (2005). Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror [book review]. *Qualitative Research*, 5(2), 258-260.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror [book review]¹

Lisa M. Tillmann
Rollins College Box 2723
Winter Park, FL 32789
Ltillmann@rollins.edu
407-646-1586

2004 may be remembered as a year when the U.S. grappled with its role as global incarcerator. In April, the world confronted digital souvenirs of physical abuse, sexual sadism, and homicide at Abu Ghraib. In June, the Supreme Court ruled that those detained at Guantánamo, many for more than two years without lawyers or formal charges, have rights enforceable in U.S. courts (the Bush administration had argued otherwise).

Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo are crises of identity and humanity. Who are we? What—and whom—do we value? In fearful times, of what—and whom—do we dispose? In whose interest? To whose profit?

Such crises do not arise in a vacuum. With nearly two million inmates, the U.S. has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world. Costing between \$20,000 and \$75,000 per person, a year of prison often is more expensive than a year at Princeton. Over half of U.S. prisoners are serving time for non-violent offenses. Hit hardest are the nation's poor and minority communities; according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 32% of black males in the U.S. will be incarcerated at some point in their lives, compared to 5.9% of white males.

¹ Cite the published version as:
Tillmann-Healy, Lisa M. (2005). *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror* [book review]. *Qualitative Research*, 5(2), 258-260.

Though actual rates of violent crime have been dropping for years, media coverage and fear of crime continue to rise. An anxious public lends widespread support to capital punishment, mandatory minimum sentences, and “three-strikes” laws, though none has any measurable effect on crime. Meanwhile, programs for families, education, employment, and drug treatment—true forces of prevention and rehabilitation—have suffered massive funding cuts.

U.S. priorities have shifted: a military budget of over 400 billion, greater than that of all other nations combined, and a boom in new prison construction. Increasingly, prison services and operations are turned over to private corporations. While Halliburton rebuilds Iraq, Sodexo Marriott serves food to its two largest captive audiences: inmates and college students.

Stephen John Hartnett has been writing about, protesting, and teaching in the U.S. prison system for more than a decade. His book, *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror*, merges “the evidence-gathering force of scholarship with the emotion-producing force of poetry” (p. 1).

The introduction situates this work in critical inquiry and action research and overviews the genre of investigative poetry. Chapters contain narrative poems on a variety of topics, including: the death penalty, wrongful incarceration, guard culture and prisoner abuse, and the history, economics, and politics of the U.S. prison industrial complex.

Several poems invite us into the lives, horrors, and dreams of the men Hartnett teaches—and who teach him (p. 67):

a huddled team of scholars addicts
fathers could’a-beens lost souls

struggling for enlightenment

Individual and collective experience is astutely contextualized, poignantly explored, and used to advance an agenda of social justice.

Readers can sense and feel dialectics between power and resistance, incarceration and liberation. Hartnett enters confined spaces willingly and leaves freely yet finds himself “haunted by prisons” (pp. 77-79):

you know that sound

the dull hollow thud
of a skull cracking
like a pumpkin...

it's not death I fear

but pain the unspeakable
complicity of knowing
somewhere a guard

high-fives his buddies
after crushing
another face

into another wall
in another prison...

Hartnett learns to bear—and bear witness to—such conditions through everyday encounters with students reaching beyond the walls of their confinement. At the author's side, we explore “the humbling complexity of holding onto hope in the face of terror” (p. 2).

In the introduction, Hartnett critiques the “sensationalism and narcissism” of personal experience-based ethnography and performance studies. But in a chapter called “Love and Death in California,” the author himself demonstrates the potential for merging auto- and critical ethnography. Hartnett moves through the despair of an

execution vigil by clinging to the loving presence of his wife. He demonstrates that his pain is personal and existential yet communal and political.

Constructed from field notes, historical documents, and published prison accounts, the poems are sometimes linear, sometimes a pastiche of images and voices. Hartnett admits that some poets have found the work “not poetic enough” (p. 2), an assessment with which many academic readers likely will disagree.

Incarceration Nation has interdisciplinary appeal and could serve as a supplemental text for content and methods courses in sociology, criminology, communication, and education. The extensive endnotes are helpful but, in the interest of narrative flow, are probably best read after each poem rather than as referenced in the text. Italics are used for multiple purposes (e.g., quotes from printed sources, dialogue, and emphasis), which can be confusing. Reading the poems aloud may add clarity to the voices as well as further depth and dimension.

However they are read, these poems challenge us to think, feel, and respond in deeper, better-informed ways to the U.S. prison industry. More broadly, *Incarceration Nation* calls us to use our skills and voices as qualitative researchers, teachers, and citizens to fulfill the promise, at home and abroad, of a free democratic society.