

“Scribes to Their Tribe”: The Arthur Kill Alliance, Collaboration, and Transformation

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“The whole purpose of AKA was to humanize the situation. What was really holding the whole thing back in my limited point of view was the ‘they’re different than we are’ idea that drove the whole separation model.” (Kirpal Gordon)

For seven years during 1982 through 1989, Kirpal Gordon, today a teacher, freelance writer, editor, and performance artist, was a language arts teacher at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility (AKCF), a medium security men’s prison in Staten Island. In that role he founded and edited the Arthur Kill Alliance (AKA), the prison newspaper. During that same period, Gordon also established, edited, and produced Empire!, a journal of work by writers incarcerated throughout New York state. The newspaper incorporated the voices and concerns of the incarcerated writers into a publication that circulated within and beyond the prison and fostered dialogue throughout the facility. Gordon accomplished this through deep, daily immersion in the life of the prison, a commitment to honor the knowledge and home languages of the AKA writers and editors, and a dedication to creating a collaborative space in an institution that discouraged such collaborations.

In this essay based on an oral history interview with Gordon, we shall explore how knowledge, activism and writing came together in a collaborative space. The production of these publications operated in what Berry calls “the contextual now,” a perspective which considers “the value of literacy in the present moment,” and considers writing as “valuable in and of itself” (Berry 2014, 155) rather than as a way to reduce recidivism or increase chances of future employment. This history contributes to our knowledge of the genealogy of prison writing programs and the ways in which literacy can be achieved,

sustained and transformed in carceral environments, especially important today as we simultaneously face a growing prison population and a return to support for higher education in prison.

The Power of Outsider Publishing

While scholarship is emerging from prison literacy programs (Berry 2014, Jacobi 2014), we have yet to investigate the histories of individuals and programs, many of which were established in the 1970s and 80s, that are foundational to such current prison literacy efforts as Jacobi's Speakout! workshops, and numerous prison-university collaborations such as Bard Prison Initiative and the Education Justice Project. Additionally, while we have paid attention to the "literary" work of incarcerated writers in such anthologies as those edited by Franklin, Chevigny, Lucas and Lawston, little attention has been paid to such "insider" documents as prison newspapers. Novek notes that "while the phenomenon of contemporary prison writing per se continues to be well-established by scholars of literature, criminal justice, and sociology (Davies 1990; Dowd 1996; Franklin 1998; Lamb et al. 2003, Scheffler 2002), the surviving internal publications of prisoners—newspaper, magazines, newsletters—are largely overlooked." (Novek 2005, 184)

Prison newspapers such as AKA are situated within a history of prison publication practices which may all be considered "outsider" publications. Novek defines "outsider" publications as "a form of alternative media created by groups that are not only overlooked by the mainstream media but also marginalized and despised by society." (Novek 2005, 283) Prison journalism first began in the 1800s, expanded in the late nineteenth century as part of the growing prison reform movement, and became a "cultural institution" (Morris 2008, 6) in the 1950s. Prison newspapers became an integral part of the prisoners' rights and prison arts movements in the 60s and 70s. (Bernstein 2010) Prison journalism, however, began to die out in the late 80s and 90s as the conservative, repressive political atmosphere

along with the growing prison population caused prisons to employ increasingly repressive security measures. As part of this fade-out of prison journalism, AKA ceased publication in 1989.

Publications such as AKA are part of an “extracurriculum” (Gere 1994) of composition as they provide alternative literacy structures and spaces outside of school for incarcerated writers to both practice important literacy skills as well as incorporate their own “home” languages into their writing. Gordon observed that one of the goals of AKA was to “make the culture of the streets speak to the culture of the classroom and vice versa,” creating a unique collaboration between the classroom and the “extracurriculum” as well as a statement about the value of privileging languages outside of academic discourse. Gordon explained that the goals for AKA were communal:

[T]he vibe of the newsroom and the newspaper was that true authority was celebrated as power to join...whereas every manifestation of the prison system expressed its authority to us as power to prevent. Another way of saying this: these overachievers found their mother wit and skillful ju-jitsu, and by using their communication skills to elevate population, they experienced transcendence from the prison of ego and understood an identity larger than themselves. In short, they became writers, contributors to their culture, scribes to their tribe.

The goal of the newspaper, then, was not to provide literacy instruction in order to practice skills that might earn AKA writers and editors jobs in the future. Rather, it encouraged hopes that the AKA writers and editors would become part of not only the AKCF community and understand they were part of “an identity larger than themselves,” writers with important cultural contributions to make. Branch observes that the discourse of correctional education “explicitly holds out the successful socialization of

its students as a central goal of the field.” (Branch 2007, 55) Redemption or socialization, at least not in the manner defined by correctional education, was not Gordon’s purpose.

The Transformation of Kirpal Gordon

Kirpal Gordon’s transformative journey at AKCF began in 1982 when he was hired as a full-time General Equivalency Diploma (GED) language arts teacher at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility. It was a medium-security men’s prison in Staten Island, NY, that opened in 1976 and closed, under some controversy, in 2011. Gordon taught language arts, including GED and college classes, and established and edited AKA and Empire! While Gordon had previously taught in prison writing workshops in Arizona, he “had no idea what went on during the day program,” which may be true for many teaching in prison literacy programs. Gordon’s full-time position provided him with a perspective many who teach in prison never get to experience.

A native New Yorker, Gordon returned in 1979 to New York City from Arizona, where after completing an MFA program in poetry at Arizona State University, he had taught English Composition, Creative Writing and World Religions at Arizona State Prison from 1977-78. Gordon, who had been a yoga and meditation teacher, studied at Naropa with Allen Ginsburg, lived in a commune, and brought the ideals and political commitment of the 1960s and 70s to his work at Arthur Kill. Even though Gordon brought radical changes to AKCF, he stressed that he should not be considered a hero. Gordon reflected “I had grown narrow-sighted playing the hero-activist-writer-advocate, but they [the incarcerated writers and editors] gave me new eyes that the revolution would not be televised.” Like the basic writing teachers Mina Shaughnessy has described, who underwent great transitions, his teaching changed Gordon. An examination of the founding and development of AKA reveals Gordon’s growth and transformation as he developed a communal space where incarcerated writers could become “scribes to their tribe.”

Transforming the Terms of Prison Literacy

AKA was established not as an isolated phenomena, but rather as part of an environment of literacy that Gordon worked to create throughout the prison. Its purpose was to facilitate collaborative conversation and to expand and re-define the prison's idea of "literacy." For example, Gordon noted the inadequacy of the GED curriculum and test. At the time the test consisted solely of multiple choice questions and did not require students to actually write, which became a compelling reason for Gordon to undertake numerous literacy initiatives: "I think that if language arts had been learned in a more meaningful way, none of this might have happened. Students weren't asked to make sentences of their thoughts; they were asked, for example, where to put in (or take out) punctuation for other people's sentences." The language arts curriculum was, as Gordon noted, "square, rote, white, mainstream, boring and irrelevant." Jacobi, twenty-some years later, remarked on the continued inadequacy of the GED, which is federally mandated in many prisons and jails; she notes that "literacy work is limited to this kind of basic training" (2004, 5). Jacobi states "Access to GED training and curriculum is vital to many low level literacy students" (2004, 5) and supplementary literacy initiatives such as prison newspapers can offer important access points for literacy support.

One of the first moves Gordon took, even though he had been told by prison administration when he was first hired to "do nothing," was to collect almost a thousand donated books from bookstores throughout New York City and to make the collection available to the entire facility. He stated "I invited teachers and their students to come to my room, browse, find a book or two and take it. I also invited the guards, counselors and shrinks, recreation staff and front office staff to come by...Many friendships were forged. A room full of free books was excellent common ground, a great way to meet colleagues." Additionally, the free lending library was a way to meet inmates who were not programmed into the class, and to invite them to become part of the newspaper staff. Gordon curated an eclectic collection of literature beyond the "harlequin romances, self-help dumb-downs and celebrity bios" common to the limited resources of many prison libraries. (Sweeney 2010) Gordon's lending library included works by

Coleridge, Whitman, London, Hughes, Hurston, Borges, Salinger, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Baraka, Piñero, and Vonnegut as well as Malcom X, Cleaver, and Angela Davis. This library was intended for serious intellectual engagement. The lending library became a hub of literacy for the entire prison and an example of how Gordon consciously worked to become part of the AKCF community in an effort to create intercultural conversations that supported social change. The library was a radical move to cross the strict boundaries separating inmates from corrections officers, civilians from prison staff, and administrators from teachers, the “us” and “them” mentality that defines a prison community.

Gordon undertook additional literacy initiatives such as developing a post-GED, pre-college writing group and an inmate-run AIDS counseling group. Branch points out that Duigood describes a similar “alternative educational space” (2007, 88), in which “inmates see themselves as being treated as subjects rather than objects” (88) in a space very similar to what Gordon had created, with an emphasis on communal decision making and the arts. Gordon understood the need for these literacy efforts to be distributed both metaphorically and literally throughout the facility. “Unlike the other teachers who stayed in their classrooms,” he stated “I moved around the facility a lot.” That movement throughout Arthur Kill provided Gordon with an understanding of the prison environment and multiple perspectives of the many people who were part of AKCF.

AKA and Subversion

Asked by the superintendent to establish a newspaper, Gordon used this invitation as an important “outreach opportunity” for the incarcerated writers to “apply communication skills and to develop literacy outside of school settings.” The newspaper became a foundational part of a culture of literacy with a purpose beyond disseminating information. Gordon commented “what better use of literacy than to make culture of it? What better use of a newspaper than to advance the value of education to inmates?” Gordon explained “we argued that it was our responsibility as educators to make their

language arts meaningful by giving them forums and outlets for self-expression...Our idea was to let the culture of the streets speak to the culture of the classroom and vice versa," a revolutionary idea about literacy in the carceral environment.

Even in a site of composition where literacy is highly regulated, it is possible for writing to become a means of subversion. Berlin notes "While language indeed serves as a means for control and domination, it can also serve as an instrument of liberation and growth." (2003, 106) While agency is obviously limited within the razor wire confines of the correctional environment, Gordon understood the power of language Berlin describes. He said "So we changed the language. Three c's—care, custody and control. In other words, we're not you, and you're not us. And my experience in the shop was, 'you are me, and I am you.' In other words, stop thinking like an inmate and start thinking like an owner." By changing the institutional language used to define incarcerated writers, Gordon was able to allow those writers to become agents of action, subverting the institution's purpose of creating them as objects to be acted upon.

Gordon obtained official prison newspaper status for AKA as well as a small budget, under a Department of Corrections directive. Beginning in fall 1984, eight hundred copies were distributed to the prison population, two hundred and fifty to prison staff, and an additional fifty copies were mailed to outside literary magazines and writers. AKA was intended, from its inaugural issue, as a text the AKCF teachers could use in their classroom, but also was distributed to prison literacy classrooms "throughout the state," for other teachers to use in their classes, thus justifying the cost to DOC. Even though censorship is a pressing issue for prison newspapers (Novek 2005; Morris 2008), the AKA staff never had to confront issues of censorship. Gordon made sure that "censorship never came up as an issue to divide us" by emphasizing the collaborative nature of the newspaper staff. He explained "To each of the news teams I made it clear that the paper is a voice for the incarcerated, not a voice for the people who were incarcerating them. Therefore, we could not give 'them' call to take it away. Censorship was a discussion and debate within our own circle..." However, even while censorship of AKA was not a problem, every

issue of the paper had to undergo review: “The Dep (deputy) of Programs...looked over each issue before we went to press, but he never had a problem with content,” testament to the skill of the editorial team in anticipating censorship issues.

Gordon’s comment that AKA existed “for them,” the incarcerated writers and editors, marks the publication as an act of resistance; as such, AKA is part of not only the history of journalism behind bars but of a long tradition of work by resistant incarcerated writers. Prison literacy researchers have noted the potential for prison writing as an act of resistance in a totalizing institution. (Stanford 2009, Whiddon 2010, Jacobi 2014, Franklin 1998, Chevigny 1999) Whiddon observes that even though Foucault characterizes a carceral space as subject to the “totalizing power of discourse,” Foucault “locates a space for the invention and even resistance” to this power. Gordon and his staff were able to resist this totalizing power through the creation of a collaborative space in which they could draw on the own experiences and languages in the creation of AKA.

“What more democratic use of literacy could there be?”

Conflicts around the newspaper were not limited to questions from the staff about appropriate content. Prison staff often asked Gordon why he was ‘trying so hard with these animals,’ as well as ‘Why did they deserve self-expression and free college?’ Such questions underscore Branch’s observation that there are “tensions produced by promoting an educational mission within a correctional setting.” (Branch 2007, 73) Gordon’s response is crucial in understanding his concept of his place in this prison. He responded that he, too, “was a subhuman mongrel, with an alias, who had been arrested as an eighteen-year old and instead of going to college on a scholarship, I could have gone to state prison except for the fact that the judge and my dad and uncle stood up for me. So now, I was standing up for my hand-picked news team who were standing up for the whole population and had the good sense to make reportage, art, photography, cartoon, op-ed and feature writing that revealed one another’s humanity. What more

democratic use of literacy could there be?" Gordon's comments about "the democratic uses of literacy" is an example of Berlin's belief that "all citizens" (Berlin 2003, 85) and it is important to note that Berlin states "all citizens" should participate in democracy.

AKA had other material consequences. Its purpose was to facilitate conversations among all readers and in the facility itself. Early in 1986 the staff ran an interview with the new warden, which, according to Gordon, was "an insightful conversation with a candid and brilliant human." However, "what people talked about," was a quote that ran beneath his photo: "If it were not for inmates, some staff members might be pumping gas or selling hamburgers at McDonald's..." The quote was "the start of a thousand conversations...up front with the staff and down back with the inmates. While most acknowledged that the quote was true, the corrections officers union took it personally, staged a protest and held a big whoop-de-doo...the morale was so poor among the guards that their union built a quality of life building next to the parking lot. I'm glad AKA helped stir it up." AKA sponsored an inmate AIDS committee, one that Gordon characterized as "under the radar, usually a one-one inmate counseling." During this period AIDS was, according to Gordon, "the really scary and unspoken thing about NYS prison life in the Eighties." Gordon's concern was well-founded, as by 1986, a survey indicated that 17.4 percent of people incarcerated in NY had been diagnosed with AIDs (Jonsen and Stryker 1993).

While Gordon left his position at AKCF and prison teaching, he maintained contact with many of this inmate newspaper "krewe." "It was a long and wonderful run whose final chapter I'm still living," he said, "because when these guys got out, I became involved in their lives, which taught me to straddle two Americas: the one we live in, and the one they live in." While he still saw a few of the men that had been involved in AKA, "almost all of those guys are dead now." Gordon not only described the material changes in the facility to which AKA contributed to, but explained that he had been transformed by the experience. He acknowledged that although he could not "represent the experience of that everyday guy in jail" as his staff could. Gordon further understood that the incarcerated writers he worked with taught him "how to

appreciate the everyday inmate, not as a guy who needed educational services but as a human being, a brother in pain.”

“The larger dialogue about democracy” in a prison setting

Even though Gordon and his staff experienced many difficulties in the production of AKA and in the creation of a literacy environment at AKCF, they persisted in spite of those difficulties as they understood the importance of establishing a space for dialogue and collaboration. Their experience reflects Berlin’s claim that social-epistemic rhetoric “contains within it a utopian moment, a conception of the good democratic society ...” (Berlin 2003, 88) Remarkably, this is what Gordon, along with co-editors Jody Swilky and Darrah Cloud, were able to achieve in a small way in the contained, constrained, and regulated world of Arthur Kill. While obviously not a “utopian moment,” within a society that is anything but democratic the editors of AKA provided a space for expression, agency, literacy and autonomy.

The history of AKA provides an opportunity to open our profession to voices that have not always been included in our histories and exemplify a longing for a “good democratic society.” While the AKA staff could not literally take part in that vision, they were able, with the work of committed teachers and activists, to learn to write various types of news articles, become informed about their world, make rhetorical choices, and to create networks among the prison community and with the outside literary world beyond the prison walls. Many of the newspaper writers went on to successfully submit their work to literary journals, publications and contests. Gordon’s ultimate goal for the paper was to help his staff achieve parole and engage with “the larger dialogue” as much as ex-inmates can.

The political movements of the 60s and 70s that Gordon was immersed in were responses to racial injustice. Indeed, a majority of the newspaper staff were African-American men. Gordon chronicled the depressing list of reasons that brought many of these men into the prison system: “Some were in there because on the street their jones was out of control—coke, heroin, pills, alcohol, sex, violence—prison

saved them from themselves; some belonged in a mental care facility; some had developmental problems or very low IQs; some had already been too long in the system; incarcerated or addicted parents, family break-ups, foster care, JD jail, adult prison, parole violation and return.” The racial imbalance Gordon notes remains disturbingly unchanged. Berry writes “As Angela Davis and others have noted, the predominance of African Americans in the prison-industrial complex has intensified over the years.” (144)

Gordon also incorporated the ideals of the 60s by creating the newspaper as a communal enterprise. While now a common workshop strategy (Jacobi 2009), Gordon not only allowed but encouraged the writers and editorial staff to make communal decisions. For example, he noted the importance of allowing newspaper writers and editors to make their own editorial choices and decisions: “I wanted to be their advisor, not its ghostwriter, managing editor and conflict resolver.” Gordon’s commitment to communal decision-making was intended to provide a voice to perhaps the most voiceless members of our society.

Despite winning several prizes for prison newspapers and being widely circulated, AKA was a relatively small publication that lasted only a few years. Why should we pay attention to the history of this long-defunct prison newspaper, its existence relegated to the small collection of copies Gordon has saved? Three reasons suggest themselves. First, AKA was an early precursor of such contemporary prison writing groups as Jacobi’s SpeakOut! group and can provide a vision for how such groups can be established and maintained as collaborative, equalitarian spaces. Second, Gordon’s story can provide a way of thinking about literacy in prison beyond functional and redemptive views of literacy, in Berry’s “contextual now,” in which writers engage in writing or its own sake. And third, such a space can be transformative not only for incarcerated writers, but for teachers as well.

AKA, while a very different kind of group than Jacobi’s SpeakOut! Group (Jacobi 2009), was an important foundation for many of today’s prison literacy groups. The SpeakOut! writing workshops are only one example of contemporary prison literacy programs that emphasize participatory democracy,

foreground the voices of their participants, and emphasize publication and distribution of marginalized voices. They are part of a lineage of prison writing workshops that began with the workshops Celes Tisdale began in Attica following the deadly riots and that AKA developed. While most of us are not full-time literacy teachers in prisons or jails, we can reflect on how literacy programs can serve not only the incarcerated writers in our classrooms, but the entire facility as well, even where the institution has conflicting goals for literacy programs. (Branch 2007, 73) Can we collaborate with administrators, corrections officers, and other teachers? While it may seem impossible to think about enacting collaborative, equalitarian goals in an institution whose very existence defies these goals, Gordon's experience demonstrates that this type of collaboration might indeed be possible if even in very small ways.

Yagelski recounts his experience of teaching in a college-prison program and reflects on what potential literacies in carceral spaces might look like. He writes "I began to realize how important the writing class was for most of them—not because they were enrolled in a college equivalency program...but because the class was a genuine escape from that depressing place, a few hours of respite from the inhumanity and degradation they experienced the rest of the week, a few moments where they were treated as students rather than as inmates-treated, that is, as human beings. Writing class was a way for them to be human again." (Yagelski 2011, 109) Even though Gordon's primary intent was to "humanize" the environment for the incarcerated writers, the production of AKA was a catalyst for the transformation of not only the writers, but of Gordon himself and the entire facility. What better use of literacy?

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