

Review:

Mary Gergen

Stephen John Hartnett (2003). *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 181 pages, ISBN 0-7591-0419-0 (Cloth), \$65.00; ISBN 0-7591-9420-4 (Paper), \$24.95

Key words:

prison, death
penalty, justice,
incarceration,
freedom, prison
poetry

Abstract: *Incarceration Nation: Investigative Poems of Prison, Hope and Terror* is the poetic outcome of the author's nine-year commitment to working in prisons as a teacher. For 12 years he has been writing about prison life and protesting conditions within prisons; he has never given up his hopes for a brighter future for those who are locked up. The poems are the result of his interactions with prisoners and those who have supported his efforts to explore the prison-industrial-complex, to reveal the ills of the system, and yet not to lose sight of the vision of American poet, Walt WHITMAN, who described "America as the world's best and most radical experiment in democracy" (p.1). Seven major sections organize 33 poetic pieces related to various prison settings, as well as to the author's life on the outside. A rich selection of notes supports the poetry.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introducing the Book's Series](#)
- [2. But is it Poetry?](#)
- [3. Poetry is Combined with Prose](#)
- [4. Incarceration Nation as Research](#)
- [5. A Poem about Mario](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introducing the Book's Series

Incarceration Nation is the first book in a new series edited by Norman K. DENZIN and Yvonne LINCOLN called "Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry." It is dedicated to works that "move outward from the writer's experiences to expose the injustices of race, class, and gender privilege." The editors will publish books that "question the structures of white patriarchy and global capitalism while helping people imagine realistic utopias." Stephen John HARTNETT's book certainly is an excellent exemplar of the goals of this series. He succeeds in combining his many years of experiential research obtained by teaching and learning in prisons with his poetic skills to produce a text that encourages an active rebuke of the prison-industrial-society that is choking America, as well as many other parts of the world today. [1]

2. But is it Poetry?

In the book's introduction HARTNETT accepts that his form of scholarship/activism is ambiguously received by various audiences. Poets wonder if his work is poetically correct; scholars doubt that it is academically correct; activists worry that it is not politically correct. In blending each of these traditions, HARTNETT is attempting a form of writing designed to stimulate critical thinking, emotional sensitivity, and social action among his readers. And lest the readers fear that they are only to be confronted with descriptions of unrelenting terror, violence, fear, savagery, and injustice, HARTNETT writes of hopeful aspects to be found within even the most depressing of situations. Many of his brightest moments are produced by the words of the prisoners themselves. For him, being in a loving relationship, in comradeship with his graduate student assistants, in caring connection with his student-prisoners, and having glimpses of possibility for the future beyond the constraints of prison allow for respite, and these uplifting moments are reflected in his poetry. He follows the words of a spiritual mentor, Father Daniel BERRIGAN, "As we hope, we are." (p.24) [2]

The poetic tradition that HARTNETT follows has a rich heritage. He describes in the introductory chapter three major threads of poetic work that have heavily influenced his own work. In this case, the poetic impulse is clearly in service of political ends, ends that stir contention among critics of poetry as to whether it is anathema to good poetry to be engaged in polemical activities. HARTNETT is on the side of those who believe that good poetry can have a political, as well as an aesthetic, purpose and he describes the work of other writers who are also committed to this dual purpose. HARTNETT cites John Dos Passos' huge opus, the *U.S.A. Trilogy*, in which pastiches of cultural artifacts—news headlines, graphics, popular song lyrics, and radio announcements, for example—are appended to the ends of stories. Some of the poems within this book are indebted to the chaotic, disjunctive collages created by Dos Passos to signify the jumble of historical events that make up the background of everyday life and the poetic impulse that follows from it. [3]

A second important influence is the "poetry of witness," that is, textual forms that describe significant life experiences from the point of view of individuals who were in the heat of the action. He cites Carolyn FORCHE's books, "The Country Between Us," about El Salvador during the civil war, and "The Angel of History," which encompasses events in World War II, as exemplars of this approach. Despite the horrors and atrocities of war, FORCHE's poetic voice strives to find a way to discover the possibility of hope in the midst of the carnage and even to move to the possibility of forgiveness. [4]

The most significant influence on HARTNETT's poetry is Peter Dale Scott's *Seculum Trilogy*, which has been extensively lauded as brilliant political poetry. The trilogy concerns the Indonesian coup, sponsored by the CIA, which resulted in the death of 500,000 Indonesian "communists" when Suharto replaced Sukarno in 1965. HARTNETT describes SCOTT's work as combining the four important qualities of great political poetry: political acumen, historical grounding,

self-reflexivity, and poetic beauty. More will be said about this poem in describing the investigative potential of poetry. [5]

3. Poetry is Combined with Prose

The introduction, "A Reader's Guide to Investigative Prison Poetry" is a very helpful orientation to the nature of the book, and it sets the mission of the author in a much broader context. Prison poetry, as a genre, has a complex and important history, and it includes emphases that are academic, aesthetic and activist, the goals that HARTNETT wishes to advance through his work. Various engaged scholars who have guided his interests are commended for their efforts, including Dwight CONQUERGOOD, who has combined academic papers written in the field of Performance Studies with activist work among teenage gangs in the poorest housing projects of Chicago. Other American scholars who have combined their research interests with concern for the well being of those they research have also been models for HARTNETT in his development as an investigative poet. He also describes Pierre BOURDIEU as a significant mentor, one who writes of the importance of fighting against the symbolic domination of the state and those who support it. Avoiding the trap of excessive subjectivity, HARTNETT claims to balance the importance of personal experience and individualistic travails with an aim of investigating the large-scale societal forces that inhabit and control daily life. [6]

In order for prisoners to have been able to create their niche in the vast and competitive world of publishing, enlightened editors had to take chances with them. HARTNETT salutes their efforts as well. He regards these publishers as the bridges by which political activists have been able to access the worlds within the prisons in fresh, daring, and heart-rending phrases. In some cases the editors themselves have been incarcerated. Among the collections HARTNETT praises are "Extracts from Pelican Bay", "Correction(s), and "Walking Rain Review." [7]

A third voice that is represented within the poems is that of the critical criminologists who have explored the workings of the prison-industrial complex from this scholarly perspective. In terms of the economics of the complex, he cites "Crime Control as Industry" by Nils CHRISTIE, "The Rich get Richer and the Poor Get Prison" by Jeffrey REIMAN, and "Punishment for Profit" by David SHICHOR. In each of these books, arguments are made that implicate the society in a corrupt and destructive game of trading on mis-taken lives for personal profit. [8]

HARTNETT includes prose sections in his book, as for example, "Love and Death in California," which includes quotations, poetic fragments and paragraphs about witnessing an execution at San Quentin prison in California. In this selection his work echoes the spirits of DOS PASSOS, FORCHE, and SCOTT. He describes the way in which learning to love his wife, Brett, has helped him to come to terms with the heavy burden of being connected to prison life, and especially to prison death.

"I have been working as a prison activist for a dozen years now, so I am well-practiced in the arts of street theatre, marching and demonstrating, in the channeling of political anger, yet I have been learning how to love relatively recently ... I cannot deny how powerfully I feel this sense that loving Brett is somehow the only way to make it through such moments without losing my bearings, without getting lost in bitterness. It seems to me, then, that death as a natural physical fact is not so much an issue as is living in the shadow of state-sanctioned murder, which cannot help but force us to think more deeply about living, about how we love and how we move through days haunted by violence." (p.123) [9]

4. Incarceration Nation as Research

Its author describes *Incarceration Nation* as investigative poetry. It is interesting to consider the standing of this work as a form of research. First, it is important to ask what it is we are searching for. What is the topic of the research? Unlike many scientific projects, the range of topics is unusually broad. HARTNETT is not seeking to answer a simple question, such as "Is the death penalty a deterrent to violent crime?" (Defenders of this form of punishment often assert a positive answer to this question). The notion of a guild-sanctioned method of inquiry is not affirmed within this work. Yet as a form of ethnographic work it has merit. The perceptions and voices of those who have witnessed, either directly as prisoners or indirectly, as HARTNETT has, the terror and the hope within the experience of incarceration, are there to be read in many verses. [10]

Recently there has been an upheaval in the psychological literature related to issues of language, including the question of why certain forms and formats have precedence over others in presenting research. Once the postmodern turn was made, many scholars came to agree that nature did not control the words used to describe it. Rather, communities of users created the vocabularies that served them in their relationship to agreed-upon worlds. Given this orientation, there is no intrinsic reason that poetic expressions cannot be used as investigative tools. The rich literary tradition of poetry has often been described as having qualities of precision, clarity, aesthetic form, emotional evocation and generality—traits that, except for emotional evocation, scientific literature also strives to attain. Thus in many respects there is no reason why a poetic form should not be a valid way of representing investigations into prison life and its ramifications. [11]

In terms of emotional/value commitments, the poet challenges the traditional research modality in that the "researcher" insists on taking a strong position in terms of moral causes, in particular social justice in the current atmosphere of penalizing the guilty in Bush America. There is no scientific neutrality here. HARTNETT's approach is in accord with many postmodern and critical theorists who rebuff the notion of a value-free science. Often these theorists do little to instantiate the possibility of claiming a highly evaluative stance, but HARTNETT does this directly. If research is about gaining new perspectives on a designated subject, then these poetic and prose renderings do suffice as such. The aesthetic and evaluative emphasis may be rejected by some potential readers, but embolden others to work along similar lines. HARTNETT's use of footnotes and

scholarly references grounds his text in traditional research practices. The poems themselves are often the words of the inmates, and in this sense, they serve as the record of the encounters of the "researcher" with the researched. [12]

A moment to summarize: Is it possible to create a book that satisfies all of the author's remarkable goals? I think that each one is at least partly reached. Sympathetic readers should certainly become more committed to the plight of the prisoners in today's system, and perhaps become more activated to do something about it. In this sense the activist goal is maximally achieved. In terms of critical sociology and the academic perspective, it is not clear how much headway HARTNETT makes in proving the existence of the "prison-industrial complex." There are no arguments that help to clarify or define how this phraseology has come to be a captivating phrase in the book. He states that the "poems document the prison-industrial complex's massive production of brutality" (p.24), but I think the claim that America is a prison-industrial complex serves more as an originating point, and less as a conclusion. How innovative and expressive the poetry is, how aesthetically refined or sublime, is a matter for discussion among those who judge poetic styles. I think the verses are touching and elegantly descriptive of lives entangled in the incarceration system, and that may be enough. I think HARTNETT's work is worthy of joining the ranks of outstanding prison-literature produced in the U.S. in the past century. The book is a strong reminder of one two of the major shames of the American culture—its rate of imprisonment, which is the highest in the "Western" world, and its use of the death penalty. This book skillfully rebukes the system and a willingness to tolerate it, and it also makes us hopeful that we can do better, moving closer to a realistic utopia at the heart of the American Dream. [13]

5. A Poem about Mario

It seems only fitting to end this review with a poem. It is a mixture of moments, of the present and the past, of the personal and the polity, of primitive injustice and the possibility of hope. This poem is primarily about one young man caught up in the system, from which he cannot escape, although he is innocent of the crime for which he is being punished. From "Visiting Mario":

each morning when you arise
 each evening before sleep
give thanks for life

the hurt of one is the hurt
 of all the honor of one is
the honor of all

like Mario turning
 pain into wisdom

like Sister Helen
singing softly
her hands pressed against the glass
of the execution chamber

I will be with you
I will be with you
all around Him
gather us around

Mario our love receive
our wishes welcome
our thanks embrace

for embodying hope
it is a privilege my friend
to encounter dignity

as we whisper along
with Dar's tribute
to Father Daniel Berrigan

"I had no right
but for the love of you
oh it's a long road
from law to justice"

(pp.152-153; Dar Williams' song, "I had no right" Track 9 from The Green World) [14]

Author

[Mary GERGEN](#) is a social psychologist, a women's studies professor, a member of the Pennsylvania Prison Society and an Official Visitor to the state's prisons. In a previous issues of *FQS* Mary GERGEN reviewed "[The Qualitative Inquiry Reader](#) and "[Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research about Cancer](#)."

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Mary Gergen
Penn State University
Delaware County Media
PA 19063-5596
USA

E-mail: gv4@psu.edu

URL:

<http://www.de.psu.edu/academics/faculty/gergen/default.html>

FQS 6(2), Art. 14, Review Mary Gergen: "Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror" (Hartnett 2003)

Citation

Gergen, Mary (2005). Review: Stephen John Hartnett (2003). Incarceration Nation: Investigative Prison Poems of Hope and Terror [14 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 14, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502149>.

Revised 6/2008