

Augie M. Torres Blogs – “Publishing as an Incarcerated Writer”

By Augie M. Torres, EJP Student

July 8, 2014

I recently received the honor of having a short story published in a relatively new publication called *Corazón Land Review: A Midwest Journal of Latino Literature* (Volume 1 – Issue 2) Winter 2014 St. Louis Missouri. I was thrilled to receive the news a few months ago notifying me that my writing had been accepted for publication. I was overjoyed when I finally received an advance copy of the journal only to discover that the editors had decided to take some liberties with the editing of my bio. The original bio I submitted went as follows:

Augie M. Torres was born in Davenport Iowa and is currently incarcerated at the Danville Prison in Danville Illinois. He moved to Ocotlan Jalisco during the recession in the 1980's. He is a student of the University of Illinois's *Education Justice Project* (EJP) and a member of The EJP's *Language Partners* Program where he is an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor. He credits the EJP for providing him with a space in which he can further develop his writing craft. He submits for publications in hopes that he can help break down misconceptions and stereotypes of incarcerated people and raise awareness about mass incarceration and the need for higher education for women and men whom are incarcerated.

Sure, at 119 words, it's a bit wordy and nothing some font shrinking

couldn't fix, if cramped for space. Nonetheless, I felt it necessary to include the reason for which I had submitted my work for publication and the fact that I am currently incarcerated. Claiming my position as an incarcerated person is imperative to me as an advocate for ending the era of Mass Incarceration, through the use of writing as a tool for giving "voice" to the millions of marginalized people in our nations prisons and jails, people who are disproportionately African American and Latin@ and come from the lower economic tier of our society. The bio which is currently on the CRL publication is as follows:

Augie M. Torres was born in Davenport Iowa and moved to Ocotlan Jalisco during the recession in the 1980's. He currently teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) to incarcerated men at the Danville prison in Illinois.

Short and to the point (37 words). Or does it get to the point? For reasons unbeknownst to me, the editors decided to omit the fact that I am currently incarcerated. This version of the bio undermines my intentions and hopes for my writing. Someone reading the published bio would presume that I am a writer and ESL teacher who *happens* to teach at a prison. Not, as I originally had hoped, to be seen as a person who is incarcerated and also writes, takes part in University courses, and teaches ESL. There is a clear distinction between the two. The latter highlights perhaps a startling contrast between myself and the other contributors to the journal, which includes a professor at the University of Missouri, a physician who has published six books to date, and an English Literature student at the University of Chicago. This juxtaposition of me with them would have hopefully caused the readers to think critically about not only how and

why an incarcerated person gets published in a literary journal, but also what entails being incarcerated. My original bio may have prompted readers to rethink any stereotypes and misconceptions they may have about those who are incarcerated, higher education in prisons, and the carceral system as a whole. Perhaps my hopes for my bio and my writing were a bit ambitious and idealistic. Perhaps the editors at CLR (Christopher Chab  and Isidor Acevedo) are open minded, progressive individuals who simply see no relevance in the fact that I am currently incarcerated. Perhaps they want to highlight my ability to produce quality, publishable writing, and feel that labels such as "prisoner," "inmate," "convicted felon," "ex-con" (to name a few), do not define me, but rather stigmatize, marginalize, those who are incarcerated. And perhaps they believe that that stigmatization creates socioeconomic hurdles and barriers that must be overcome upon reentry to society in order to obtain essentials such as employment, housing, and educational opportunities, and make recidivism more of a potential reality. If that is the case, then I applaud Christopher Chab  and Isidor Acevedo for championing the cause and helping eradicate ideals which perpetuate Mass Incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex, which in turn disproportionately affect African Americans and Latin@s here in the U.S. where we incarcerate more people per capita than any other nation. We currently warehouse 2.3 million people in our prisons and jails. The U.S. is home to only 5% of the world's population, yet lays claim to 25% of the world's prison population. Or perhaps the editors at CLR do not want their readers to know that the journal is publishing writings from incarcerated people. After all, what

respectable journal publishes work from “prisoners,” and not only publishes the work, but actually highlights the fact that the contributors are currently incarcerated? Well, I happen to know of at least one. In the fall of 2012, I, along with colleagues of mine from the aforementioned *Language Partners (LP)* Program, received the honor of being published in a peer reviewed journal called *TETYC Teaching English in the Two-Year College: National Council of Teachers of English* (Volume 40 – Number 1 September 2012) Special Issue: ESL Teaching and Learning: Writings in Diverse Voices. Oddly enough, those editors insisted upon highlighting the fact that LP was the only ESL program of its kind within the U.S. where the actual teaching is done by incarcerated people. Those editors felt that our story was noteworthy *because* of our incarcerated status. I am grateful to the editors of TETYC for affording us with the opportunity, and platform, to have our voices heard. So why make such a fuss about incarcerated people, and the need for their “voices” to be heard? After all, haven’t these people broken our societal agreement of conduct, therefore foregoing their rights as citizens? Don’t they have to pay their debt to society (i.e., be punished)? Before you answer these questions, allow me to provide you with some helpful facts about our criminal justice system. The U.S. boasts a national prison recidivism rate of 67.5%. As a nation we should be ashamed of this statistic, especially when the following fact is taken in to consideration: The U.S. no longer “officially” operates or refers to its prisons as “prisons” (a place where punishment is to be carried out) but as “Correctional Centers” (hence the term *Department of Corrections*) whose claim is no longer to carry out punishment but to be focused on the “rehabilitation” of their residents.

When I say we should be ashamed of ourselves, I do not mean we should be ashamed of the recidivists, but of the system which produces the recidivism number 67.5% while spending billions each year (over \$24,000 a year per incarcerated person) to warehouse women, men, and children in overcrowded prisons with limited educational opportunities – the average recidivism rate for those incarcerated who had participated in college programs was 46% lower than those who had not – or other meaningful forms of “rehabilitation.” No wonder 90% of those sent to prison before the age of 18 were released without a GED or high school diploma. To blame the recidivists is to make the claim that the Department of Corrections is doing everything possible to “rehabilitate” its prisoners and that the onus lies within the individual. To subscribe to this school of thought is to perpetuate the bigoted notion that Latin@ and African American men and women are inherently “morally” flawed and incapable of complying with our societal rules and regulations. This deduction is based on the fact that these two minority groups are grossly overrepresented within our criminal justice system, which claims to utilize a “color-blind” approach.

Statistically speaking, 1 in every 4 African American males will go to prison within their lifetime, 1 in every 6 Latino males will go to prison within their lifetime, and only 1 in 23 white males will go to prison in their lifetime, a stark contrast few could ignore. When I say the U.S. *boasts* a national prison recidivism rate of 67.5%, I refer to the fact that many politicians and policy makers refer to this number when advocating for “tough on crime” sentencing guidelines such as the transferring of minors from the juvenile system to the adult system, the elimination of funding for

educational programs in prison, mandatory minimum, the three strikes rule, and the death penalty. I would not expect every person within the U.S. to be familiar with these eye opening statistics – this includes the editors at CLR – but I would hope that if made aware of them, people would begin to question why such disproportionality exists, and more importantly, what is being done (if anything) to change it. Giving *voice* to oppressed and marginalized populations, through literacy has, in the past, served as an invaluable tool in the fight against ideals which perpetuate oppressive institutions. Frederick Douglass brought to a white audience the realities of slavery, and challenged the “fiction” many whites believed about this horrendous institution. In turn, literature has played an important role in campaigns surrounding prison reform. Robert Burns’s *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang* played a central role in the campaign to abolish the inhumane practice of using chain gangs as a form of discipline and punishment. By no means am I attempting to compare my CLR submission to the writings of Mr. Douglass and Mr. Burns. The point I wish to convey to the readers here is that it is imperative we give voice to the marginalized and respect the transformative effect literacy can have on oppressive institutions and those who knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate them. I understand that it may be too late to make changes to my bio this late in the printing process, but I will request of the CLR editors some clarification as to why certain facts were left out of the original bio submission. I will also be forwarding them a copy of this writing in hopes that any future submissions by incarcerated people will be given the recognition they desperately need and deserve.